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The
PLEASANT MEMOIRS
OF THE
MARQUIS DE BRADOMIN

FOUR SONATAS
By RAMON DEL VALLE-INCLAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY
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Note

These pages are taken from the "Very Pleasant Memoirs" written in exile in old age by the Marquis of Bradomín. He was an ideal Don Juan—perhaps the most admirable of all time.

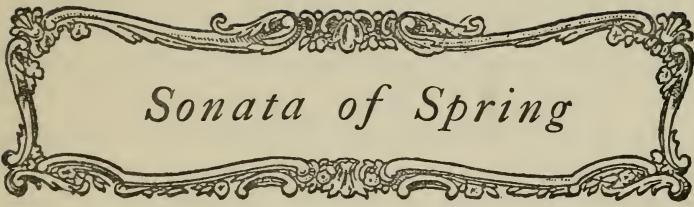
He was ugly, a Catholic, and a sentimentalist.



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Sonata of Spring

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IGHT was falling as the post-wagon made its way through the Salarian Gate and turned out across the plains with their mysterious shadows and whispering sounds. The land was one of trellises and olive groves, of ruined aqueducts and sloping hills that had the gentle grace of a woman's breasts. The coach followed an ancient

highway; the mules jogged heavily along under their collars, and the light, unseemly jingle of their bells awoke the echoes of the blossoming olive-groves. Ancient sepulchres stretched along the road, shadowed by the venerable cypresses that bent across them.

The post-wagon journeyed on over the old highway till my eyes, weary of searching through the night, grew heavy with sleep. At last I slumbered and did not awaken until almost dawn when the pallid moon was fading in the sky.

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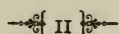
After a while, still chilled by the dampness and stillness of the night, I began to hear the distant crowing of the cocks and the increasing rumble of a stream that seemed to be awakening with the sun. At a distance appeared the gloomy walls, black against the cold blue horizon, of the ancient, noble and pious city of Liguria.

We entered by the Lorencine Gate, the coach advancing slowly, the bells of the mules starting incongruous echoes that seemed almost sacrilegious in the deserted grass-grown streets. Three old women huddled like shadows outside the barred doors of a church, while in the distance a bell was summoning the faithful to early mass. The coach proceeded down a road that ran between gardens, manor-houses and convents, an ancient cobbled highway. Sparrows were chirruping under the projecting eaves and at the end of the street a lamp sputtered under an archway. As the coach passed slowly I was able to distinguish the picture of a Madonna; she was holding the infant to her breast and he, smiling and naked, stretched out his arms towards a little fish which the Virgin's hands held before him in celestial play. The post-wagon drew up; we were in front of the gates of the Clementine College.

It was the happy period when the popes were kings, and the Clementine College still enjoyed its tithes, its rights and revenues. It was still the resort of learned men and might have been called a noble repository of knowledge. For many years the rectorship had been held by an illustrious prelate, Monsignor Estefano Gaetani, Bishop of Betulia, of the family of the Gaetani Princes. It was to this distinguished exemplar of evangelical virtues and theological learning that I was bearing the cardinal's hat. His Holiness had been pleased to honour my youthful years by selecting me from his Noble

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Guard for this high mission. I am a Bibiena de Rienzo, through my paternal grandmother, Julia Aldegrina, daughter of that Prince Maximo of Bibiena who died in 1770, victim of the poison of the comedienne Simoneta la Corticelli, the story of which fills a long chapter in the Memoirs of the Caballero de Sentgal.



The officials of the College in soutane and biretta were strolling in the cloister. They were aged and ceremonious. On seeing me enter they hastened to meet me. "A great affliction, Excellency! A great affliction!" I stopped and looked from one to another. "What has happened?" They sighed in unison. One of them answered: "Our learned Rector—." And another in a doleful, authoritative voice added: "Our beloved father, Excellency!—our beloved father, our master, our guide, is at the point of death. Yesterday he had a stroke at the house of his sister—."

Here the other, who had stopped to dry his eyes, took up the story: "The Princess Gaetani, a Spanish lady married to the eldest brother of His Highness, the Prince Filippo Gaetani. Hardly a year has passed since he was killed while hunting. Another great misfortune, Excellency—."

I interrupted to ask: "Monsignor has been brought back to the College?"

"The Princess would not consent to it. As I tell you, he is at the point of death."

I bowed solemnly: "The will of God be done!"

The two officials crossed themselves devoutly. From the other end of the cloister came the sound of a small silver bell. It announced the Viaticum for Monsignor, and all the

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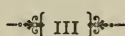
birettas were removed. Immediately the faculty of the College formed in procession under the arches: humanists and theologians, doctors and bachelors made up a long cortège. In two files they issued from under the cloister, murmuring their liturgical prayers. Their folded hands held the birettas, their College robes swept the pavements. I fell on one knee and waited until they passed. Doctors and bachelors gazed at me. My cloak of the Noble Guard proclaimed my identity, and they remarked upon it in whispers. When they had passed I rose and followed. The little bell of the Viaticum sounded down the street. Here and there various pious old souls hurried out from the houses with lighted candles and, making the sign of the Cross, joined in the procession. We drew up in a lonely square in front of a palace the windows of which were illuminated. The cortège quietly entered the narrow portals. Under the archway the sounds of the prayers grew deeper and the silvery tinkle of the bell rose gloriously above the mutter of weary, contrite voices.

We mounted the signorial staircase. All the doors stood open and the old servants bearing lighted tapers guided us through the empty rooms. The chamber where Monsignor Estefano Gaetani lay dying was veiled in a religious obscurity. The noble prelate was stretched on an antique bed covered by a silken canopy. His eyes were closed; his head was hidden in the hollow pillows and his sharp profile, that of a Roman patrician, was outlined in the half light, white and sepulchral as the features on a marble mausoleum. At the far end of the apartment stood an altar before which the Princess and her five daughters were kneeling.

The Princess Gaetani was still a beautiful woman. Her lips were very red, her hands like snow; her eyes had a light as golden as her hair. On remarking me she turned her full

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glance upon me and smiled with gentle sadness. I bowed and observed her in turn. This Princess Gaetani recalled the portrait of Marie de Médicis, painted at the time of her marriage to the King of France by Peter Paul Rubens.



Monsignor could scarcely open his eyes and raise his head on the pillows as the priest bearing the Sacrament approached his bedside. When he had received the communion his head fell over feebly while his lips muttered a fervent Latin prayer. The procession silently began to retire and I also left the bedroom. In the ante-chamber I was approached by one of the Monsignor's suite: "Doubtless you are the envoy of His Holiness?"

"You are correct; I am the Marquis de Bradomín."

"The Princess has just told me."

"Does the Princess recognise me?"

"She has known your parents."

"When may I offer her my respects?"

"The Princess will speak to you at once."

We stood aside to continue our conversation in the hollow of the window. When the last of the collegians had passed and the ante-chamber was deserted, I glanced instinctively at the bedroom door and beheld the Princess issuing with her daughters, wiping her eyes with a lace handkerchief. I approached and kissed her hand. She murmured softly: "It is a sad occasion on which I see you again, my son."

Her voice seemed to awaken in my soul a world of old-time memories and vague smiles, happy with the touch of youth. The Princess continued: "Do you remember your mother? As a child you were very like her, but now you

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are changed. How often I have held you in my arms! Don't you remember anything about me?"

I stammered in indecision: "I remember the voice—."

Then in silence I went back over the past. The Princess gazed on me smilingly, and suddenly in the golden mystery of her eyes I recalled who she was. To my answering smile she then asked me: "Do you remember now?"

"Yes."

"Who am I?"

I kissed her hand again and replied: "The daughter of the Marquis de Agar."

She smiled sadly at this reminder of her youth and presented me to her daughters: "Maria del Rosario, Maria del Carmen, Maria del Pilar, Maria de la Soledad, Maria de las Nieves. There are five Marias."

I saluted them all with one deep bow. The eldest, Maria del Rosario, was in her twentieth year, and the smallest, Maria de las Nieves, a child of five. They seemed gentle and beautiful. Maria del Rosario was pale, with dark eyes full of languid ardour. The others, with their golden eyes and hair, were very much like their mother. The Princess took a seat on a broad sofa of crimson damask and began to speak in a low voice. Her daughters retired in silence, leaving me with a smiling salute of timid amiability. Maria del Rosario was the last to go. I believe there was a smile both in her eyes and on her lips, but this was all so long ago that I cannot be definite. I can still remember, however, the dark cloud of trouble that came over my soul as I saw her leave. The Princess kept her eyes fixed on the door through which they had disappeared, and then with the suavity of a fine lady said to me: "Now you know them."

I bowed. "They are as beautiful as their mother."

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“They are good children, which is much better.”

I kept silent, for I have always believed that the goodness of women is even more fickle than their beauty. The poor lady believed the contrary and continued: “Maria Rosario will enter the convent in a few days. God grant she may become another Blessed Francisca Gaetani!”

I murmured solemnly: “The separation will be as cruel as death.”

The Princess interrupted me quickly: “No doubt it will be a great trial, but there will be consolation in the thought that the temptations and dangers of the world will be removed from our dear one. If all my daughters were to enter a convent I would gladly follow them. Unhappily, not all of them are like Maria Rosario.”

She fell silent, thinking of her ideal, and in the depths of her golden eyes I fancied I beheld the light of a dark and tragic fanaticism. At that moment one of Monsignor Gaetani’s attendants appeared at the door, hesitating to interrupt our silence till the Princess deigned to ask him condescendingly: “What has happened, Don Antonino?”

Don Antonino folded his hands unctuously and lowered his eyes: “The Monsignor desires to speak with the envoy of His Holiness.”

“Does he know that he is here?”

“Yes, Your Excellency. He saw him at the time he was receiving the Last Sacrament. In spite of all appearances, Monsignor has not lost consciousness for a moment.”

At this I rose to my feet. The Princess reached out her hand, which I kissed, even at that moment, with more gallantry than respect; then I went back into Monsignor’s sick-room.

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The noble prelate fixed his dying eyes on me and made a sign to bless me, but his hand fell weakly against his body, while a tear stole down his cheek. His heavy breathing was the only sound in the whole chamber. At last he was able to stammer: "Señor Captain, I wish you to take the Holy Father my acknowledgement of gratitude—."

He fell into silence and for some time his eyes were closed. His dry, blue lips seemed to be moving in prayer. Opening his eyes again, he continued: "My time is short. Honours, titles and rank, all for which I strove during life are at this moment turned to ashes before my fading sight. Our God and Saviour does not abandon me, but reveals to me the bitterness and uselessness of earthly things. Around me gather the shadows of Eternity, but my soul is lighted within with the divine light of Grace."

Again he was obliged to cease and in weakness closed his eyes. One of the servants approached and wiped his forehead with a dainty handkerchief. Then turning to me, he whispered: "Señor Captain, try to keep him from talking."

I nodded assent. Monsignor opened his eyes and looked at us both. A mutter came from his lips; I bent over to hear him but could understand nothing. The servant led me away and, leaning over the pillow of the dying man, said with gentle firmness: "His Excellency must now take his rest. No more conversation."

The prelate made a disconsolate sign. The servant again passed the handkerchief across the forehead, telling me at the same time with his sagacious eyes that we must not continue. Agreeing with him I made a salute and retired. The servant took a seat near the bedside, drawing his cassock about

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him in an attitude of meditation or perhaps of sleep; but the moment Monsignor realised I was retiring he gathered his strength together and called: "Do not leave me, my son! I desire you to bear my confession to the Holy Father."

He waited until I again approached him and, with his eyes fixed on the white altar at the rear of the chamber, he continued: "My God, regard as penance my sorrow for my sin and the share I have in confessing it!"

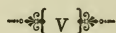
The prelate's eyes filled with tears. His utterance was heavy and painful. The servants gathered in turn about his bed. Everything showed their great sorrow as well as the edification with which they received the announcement of the dying Bishop's confession. I knelt down as the prelate continued to pray in silence, his eyes fixed on the crucifix of the altar. One by one tears ran down his discoloured cheeks. At last he began:

"My sin started with the first letters from my friend Monsignor Ferrati, announcing the intention of His Holiness to confer the red hat upon me. How weak is our human nature; how miserable the clay of which we are made! I believed that my princely descent was more important than the learning and virtues of others. Pride sprang up in my soul, most fatal of human guides, and I thought that on another day I might be called upon to rule the Christian world. There have been popes and saints in my family and I imagined it might happen again. It is thus that Satan blinds us. I felt that I was old and looked to put off death from my path. Our Lord and God did not grant me the sacred scarlet; but still when vague and alarming rumours came I persisted in hoping against the expected death of His Holiness which would have wrecked all my expectations. My God! I have profaned Thy altar, praying Thee to preserve his life so that at some future day his

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déath at the proper time might be favourable to my ambitions! O my God, until to-day, blinded by the devil, I have been without a proper realisation of my sin. Lord, who readest the hearts of men, Thou knowest my sin and my repentance, and wilt grant me pardon!"

He became silent, his whole body trembling in agony. He had spoken in a feeble voice of gentle grief. The shadows under his eyes spread over his cheeks; deeper and deeper into their sockets the eyes melted into the darkness of death. Then he stretched out rigid, indifferent, his head lowered, his mouth half-open, his breast heaving. We were all on our knees, irresolute, not daring to speak or stir, so as not to disturb the slumber that filled us with dread. Outside in the square could be heard the perpetual murmur of the fountain and the voices of children playing around it. They were singing in a ring a languid old folk-song. An early spring-time light shone on the sacred vessels of the altar and the attendants lowered their voices in prayer, edified at the devout scruples that had tormented the pure soul of the prelate. I, sinner that I was, began to nod, as I had passed the night before in the post-wagon and was worn out by the long journey.



As I came out of the Monsignor's death-chamber I was met at the door by an old and ceremonious major-domo.

"Excellency, my Lady Princess has sent me to lead you to your quarters."

I could hardly repress my feelings. At that instant some strange springtime breath swept across my soul with the thought of the five daughters of the Princess. The idea of living in the Gaetani palace gave me a world of pleasure, but

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I had strength enough to refuse it: "Express my gratitude to the Lady Princess Gaetani and say that I will lodge at the Clementine College."

The major-domo looked surprised: "Excellency, I assure you that you will only create difficulties. However, if you are resolved I have orders to report your intentions. Will you allow me a few moments? The mass is coming to an end."

I resigned myself with a gesture: "Say nothing to her about it. God forgive me for preferring this palace with its five enchanted damsels to the grave theologians of the Clementine College."

The major-domo looked at me suspiciously as if he had doubts about my reason. Then he showed a desire to talk—reservedly—and finished by showing me the way, leading with a smile. I followed him. He was an elderly, clean-shaven man, clothed in a great ecclesiastical garment that brushed against the silver buckles of his shoes. He was called Polonius and walked noiselessly on his toes, turning every now and then to address me mysteriously in a low voice: "There seems little hope that Monsignor can live." And after a few more steps: "I have begun a novena to the Blessed Madonna." A little farther on, as he raised a curtain: "It is the least I can do. Monsignor had promised to take me to Rome." And as he turned to continue his mission: "God did not will it! God did not will it!"

In this manner we passed through the ante-chamber, the deserted salon and the library. There the major-domo drew himself up before a closed door and felt through his trousers pockets. "Heaven help me!" he exclaimed. "I have lost my keys."

He continued his search and, finding them at last, threw

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open the door for me: "The Lady Princess places the salon, the library and this chamber at your disposal."

I entered. The apartment was similar to that in which Monsignor Gaetani was dying. It was hung in antique scarlet damask, and was dark and silent. I threw my cloak of the Noble Guard across a chair and turned to look at the paintings ranged along the walls. They were ancient studies of the Florentine School and represented scenes from the Bible—Moses Found Among the Reeds, Susanna and the Elders, Judith with the Head of Holofernes. So that I might have better light, the major-domo went from one window to another drawing back the curtains. Then he let me study them in silence, walking behind me like a shadow, without ceasing to smile in his vague doctoral manner. When he thought I had satisfied my inclination, he raised himself on his toes and I could hear his broken voice, more amiable and mysterious than before: "What do you think of them? They are all by the same hand, and such a hand!"

I interrupted to say: "Andrea del Sarto, no doubt."

Messer Polonius assumed an almost solemn air: "Attributed to Raphael."

As I turned for another glance, Messer Polonius continued: "Notice that I merely say, attributed. In my humble opinion they are more precious than works by Raphael—I believe them to be painted by the Divine One!"

"Who is the Divine One?"

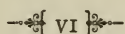
The major-domo threw back his hands in consternation: "Can your Excellency ask me that? Who else but Leonardo da Vinci?"

And he looked at me in silent pity. I could hardly hide a mocking smile; but Messer Polonius pretended not to see it, and with the shrewdness of a Roman cardinal he began to

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flatter me: "Till to-day I have never had a doubt. Now I confess you make me hesitate. Perhaps Your Excellency is right. Andrea del Sarto painted for a time in the studio of Leonardo and their pictures from that period are so much alike that they are easily confused. In the Vatican there is an example of this, the Madonna of the Rose. Some declare it is Leonardo's; others say it is by del Sarto. My opinion is that it is by the husband of Donna Lucretia de Fede, touched over by the Divine One. You know that this was frequently done between masters and students."

I listened with an air of fatigue. Messer Polonius, finishing his address, made me a deep bow and hurried about the room to draw the curtains. The place was left in a twilight very suitable for sleep. Messer Polonius took his leave in low tones as if we were in a chapel, and closed the door silently behind him. My fatigue was so great that I slept until night-fall. I awoke dreaming of Maria Rosario.



The library had three doors on a marble terrace. Down in the garden the fountains unceasingly murmured, in voices eternally young, their commentary on the thoughts of love. Leaning across the balustrade I felt the breath of spring against my forehead. Under the setting sun the old garden of myrtles and laurels was full of pagan beauty. Passing through the twisted paths of the labyrinth below, the five sisters were to be seen with their aprons filled with roses as in some ancient myth. In the distance extended the Tyrrhenian Sea ploughed by lateen sails in the amber light. Along the golden sands of the shore the languid waves were dying, dying to the blowing of conch-shells that announced the fish-

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ermen's return and the dull roar of the sea, a harmony for this ancient garden of fragrance where the five sisters measured out their youthful dreams in the rosy shadows of laurels.

They had sat down on a long marble bench to rearrange their roses. A dove had come and settled on the shoulder of Maria Rosario, and in its gracious arrival I had read the charm and mystery of a fable. The bells of the town were proclaiming some festa, and a church on a neighbouring hill lifted itself against the sky from a green frame of cypresses. The procession came forth and filed around the church with the sacred images on their litters and the red parish banners flaming in their liturgical triumph. The five sisters knelt upon the grass and joined their hands together among the roses.

Blackbirds sang in the trees and their song seemed to be united with the far-off rhythm of the waves. The five sisters had returned to their benches. They bound their roses together, their white hands shining like snowy doves between the scarlet flowers. The sunbeams piercing the foliage trembled over them like mystical flames. The Tritons and Sirens of the fountains sputtered in fantastic laughter and the silvery waters murmured youthfully through the mossy beards of the sea-monsters bending to kiss the marble Sirens on their breasts. The five sisters rose to enter the palace. They advanced through the labyrinth slowly like enchanted princesses in love with their own dream. When they spoke their voices died away among the little sounds of evening and only the springtime wave of their laughter rose harmoniously in the shadows of the classic laurels.

When I entered the salon of the Princess the lamps were lighted. The grave voice of a Dean of the College was heard in the silence among the ladies of the Princess Gaetani's

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party. The salon was in gold, in the French style, very feminine and luxurious. Cupids in garlands, nymphs in laces, gallant huntsmen and antlered stags filled the tapestries on the walls, and on the consoles in graceful groups shepherd-prince-lings of porcelain crowned the brows of rural marquises with flowers. I stopped at the entrance. On seeing me, the ladies in the drawing-room began whispering, and the Dean rose to his feet: "Permit me, Señor Captain, to salute you in the name of all the Clementine College."

He held out a large white hand that seemed worthy of the amethyst ring. Under pontifical privilege he wore a velvet cape which lent him distinction and majesty. He was young in spite of his white hair. His eyes were full of fire, his nose aquiline, his mouth firm and chiselled like a statue. With an air of sentimental languor, the Princess presented him: "Monsignor Antonelli, a wise and holy man."

I made a low salute: "I know well, Princess, that the Roman cardinals consult him on difficult questions in the clergy; the reputation of his virtues has penetrated everywhere."

The Dean interrupted in a calm, gentle manner: "I am merely a philosopher of the old school, love with wisdom."

Then, turning to his chair, he continued: "You have seen Monsignor Gaetani? What a pity! A great and unexpected catastrophe!"

A sorrowful silence fell on all. Two older ladies, clothed in severe black, asked at the same moment: "Then there is no hope?"

The Princess sighed: "None, except in a miracle."

Silence followed again. At the other end of the salon the daughters of the Princess sat in a circle embroidering on cloth of gold. They spoke together in whispers and smiled with

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bowed heads. Maria Rosario alone remained perfectly silent, embroidering as if in a dream. The golden threads trembled in the needles, as under the damsel's fingers they developed into the roses and lilies of the heavenly garden of the sacred vestment. Suddenly there sounded three great strokes across this peaceful world. The Princess grew mortally pale; the others exchanged startled glances. The Dean rose to his feet: "Permit me to retire; I had no idea it was so late. Can they have closed the doors already?"

The Princess trembled as she replied: "They have not closed them."

The two older women in black whispered: "Some impertinence!"

They exchanged timid glances as if to read each other's minds and waited in hidden suspense. The strokes were repeated, but this time inside the Gaetani palace. A wind swept through the salon and extinguished some of the lights. The Princess uttered a sigh; we gathered around her. She gazed on us, her lips trembling, her eyes in terror. Somebody said: "This happened once before at the death of Prince Filippo, and the same thing occurred at his father's death."

At that moment Messer Polonius appeared in the doorway and stopped. The Princess raised herself on the sofa and wiped her eyes. Then with noble calmness, she asked: "Has he died?"

The major-domo bowed his head: "He rests with God!"

A tide of groans swept the apartment. The ladies gathered around the Princess who, with her handkerchief over her eyes, swooned in weakness on her couch, as the Dean of the College made the sign of the Cross.

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Maria Rosario, her eyes heavy with tears, put away her needles and cloth of gold. At the far end of the room I could see her bending over the little chiselled coffer she held on her lap. She was praying, no doubt, as her lips were moving softly. Against her cheeks the shadows of her lashes trembled till I felt her whole face white and tremulous in the depths of my soul, with a mysterious, poetical enchantment like that of the moon shimmering on the surface of a lake. She closed the coffer, placing the golden key within, and put it on the carpet in order to lift up the tiniest of her sisters who was weeping in fear. She bent over and kissed her. I saw the blonde, baby tresses of Maria Nieves fall across the arms of Maria Rosario and recalled the simple beauty of the old paintings where the monks depicted the Virgin. The little one complained: "I feel sleepy."

"Do you want me to call your maid to put you to bed?"

"Malvina always leaves me the moment she thinks I am asleep, and when I am alone I am frightened."

Maria Rosario lifted the child in her arms and like a silent shadow crossed the room. I moved forward quickly to raise the curtain at the door. Maria Rosario passed without giving me a glance. The child, however, looked at me with her tearful eyes and said, timidly: "Good night, Marquis."

"Adieu, my dear."

With my heart wounded by Maria Rosario's disdain, I re-entered the salon where the Princess was lying with her handkerchief over her eyes. The old ladies of her circle were still with her, and from time to time they turned to comfort the daughters who were suffering a sorrow only less than their mother's: "My children, it is time you went to bed."

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"Somebody must arrange about the mourning."

"Where has Maria Rosario gone?"

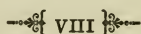
The voice of the Dean was also heard, grave and amiable; every word he spoke stirred a murmur of admiration among the ladies. The slightest word from his lips was full of ecclesiastical learning and Christian unction. From time to time he fixed his gaze on me with a rapid, knowing glance, and I realised with a start that his dark eyes wished to read my soul. I was the one person who remained silent and perhaps the only one who felt a real grief. I realised for the first time in my life the gallantry and the potency of the Roman prelates and my memory went over the legends of their amorous adventures. I confess there were moments when I forgot the occasion, the place and even the white hairs of these noble ladies and felt jealous, madly jealous, of the gallant Dean. Suddenly, at a moment when all were silent, the Dean approached me, placed his hand affectionately on my shoulder and said: "Dear Marquis, it is time to send a messenger to His Holiness."

I bowed: "You are right, Monsignor."

He replied with extreme courtesy: "I am pleased that we are of the same mind. What a great misfortune, Marquis!"

"A very great misfortune, Monsignor!"

We stared at each other, equally convinced that our pretences were equal, and we separated. The Dean turned again to the Princess and I left the salon in order to write the tidings to the Cardinal Camarlengo, who at that time was Monsignor Sassoferrato.



At this very moment, perhaps, Maria Rosario might be praying by the body of Monsignor Gaetani! This thought

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came to me as I passed into the library amid its silence and shadows. It came from far away and passed over my soul like a breath of air over some lake of mysteries. I felt the clutch of icy hands upon my breast and suddenly rose to my feet. Leaving on the desk the folded paper upon which I had only inscribed the Cross, I made my way toward the mortuary chamber. The odour of burnt wax filled the palace. Silent lackeys were on duty in the corridors, and two of the attendants passing through the antechamber saluted me with inclinations of the head. Nothing could be heard except the echo of footsteps and the crackling of the candles burning at the bedside.

I reached the door and stopped. Monsignor Gaetani lay rigid in his bed, shrouded in the Franciscan habit; a silver cross was in his hands and flickering tapers played their lights and shadows on his marble profile. There at the foot of the bed knelt Maria Rosario. I gazed on her for a moment; she raised her eyes, crossed herself three times, kissed the cross made by her fingers and, rising, approached the door: "Marquis, has my mother remained in the salon?"

"I have just left her there."

"She has need of rest; for two nights she has not slept. Adieu, Marquis."

"Do you not wish me to accompany you?"

She turned again: "Yes, come with me. The truth is that Maria Nieves has infected me with her fears."

We crossed the ante-chamber. The attendants paused for a moment to watch us as far as the door. We went down the lonely corridor and, losing my self-control, I seized Maria Rosario by the hand and kissed it before she snatched it away with lively displeasure: "What are you doing?"

"I adore you! I adore you!"

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In fear she fled down the long corridor, I following her with my declaration: "I adore you! I adore you!"

My breath almost brushed against her neck which was white as marble and exhaled some strange perfume, as of a virginal flower.

"I adore you! I adore you!"

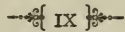
In dread she whispered: "Leave me! Please leave me!"

And without turning her head, she fled trembling along the corridor. Breathless and weak, she reached the door of the salon, while I still murmured at her ear: "I adore you! I adore you!"

Maria Rosario passed her hands over her eyes and entered. I followed, smoothing my moustache. Maria Rosario paused under a lamp and gazed upon me with frightened eyes and a sudden blush. Then she turned pale, pale as death. With uncertain steps she approached and took a seat among her sisters who leaned over to question her. She could hardly answer. They spoke in such low tones and so slowly that one could overhear the pendulum of the clock. Little by little the party had broken up; only the two old ladies in black silk remained. About midnight the Princess consented to retire for rest, but her daughters continued to watch until daybreak, in company with the two old ladies who recounted to them stories of their youth; memories of old feminine fashions and of the wars of Bonaparte. I listened attentively from the depths of a chair hidden in the shadows from which I could watch Maria Rosario. She seemed lost in a dream; her lips, pallid with strange desires, remained parted as though she were speaking with invisible spirits, her motionless eyes looking into some infinity which they could not see. Gazing on her I felt love rising in my heart, ardent and

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tremulous as a mystical flame. All my passions died down in that sacred fire and were wafted away like the spices of Araby. Many years have passed, and still this memory makes me sigh.



When it was almost morning I retired to the library. It was necessary to inform the Cardinal Camarlengo and I decided to accomplish this during these sad monotonous hours while all the bells of Ligura were tolling for the death, and priests and archpriests in Latin rites were commending to God the soul of the Bishop of Betulia. In my letter to Monsignor Sassoferrato I gave a full account of everything and then, having sealed it and stamped it with the five seals of the pontifical arms, I called the major-domo and gave him the missive with instructions to post it immediately to Rome. When this was finished I went to the Princess's oratory where they had been saying masses since early dawn. The first celebrants had been the household clergy who had watched the body, the chaplains of the house, followed by an immensely stout collegiate dean who arrived late and breathless. The Princess had given orders to throw open the palace gates and all through the corridors sounded the voices of the people who had come to survey the corpse. Servants were on guard in the entrance-halls and acolytes came and went in their red cassocks and white rochets, pushing their way through the throngs of the devout.

On entering the oratory my heart began to beat. Maria Rosario was kneeling there, and I had the good fortune to hear mass beside her. When the benediction was given I advanced to salute her. She responded trembling; my heart was also trembling, but her eyes could not see this. I could have

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wished her to place her hand on my breast, but I was sure she would not have consented. This maiden was as cruel as all the saints in whose white hands tremble the virginal palms. I confess to a preference for others of the canonised who in their time were great sinners. Unhappily, Maria Rosario could hardly be expected to feel that her destiny was less beautiful than that of Mary of Magdala. The simple maid did not know that the best part of sanctity lies in the temptation. I desired to offer her the holy water and with gallant haste advanced to hold it for her; Maria Rosario barely touched the tip of my finger and, making the sign of the Cross, left the oratory. I followed and caught sight of her for a moment down the shadowy corridor conversing with the major-domo. She seemed to be giving him orders in a low voice. She turned her head, and, seeing me approach, she blushed deeply. The major-domo exclaimed: "Here is the Lord Marquis!"

Then, directing a deep reverence to me, he continued: "Excellency, pardon me if I trouble you; but tell me if you are put out with me. Have I committed any fault or perhaps forgotten something?"

Maria Rosario interrupted him wearily: "Be silent, Polonius."

The mellifluous major-domo was in consternation: "What have I done to merit this?"

"I tell you to keep still."

"I obey you, but when you reproach me for carelessness in my service to the Lord Marquis—."

Maria Rosario, her cheeks flaming, her voice choking with anger and tears, again interrupted him: "I tell you to keep your explanations to yourself."

"What am I to do, my dove, what am I to do?"

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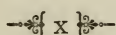
Maria Rosario, slightly soothed, replied: "No more! No more! I beg your pardon, Marquis."

Making a light curtsy, she hurried off. The major-domo stood in the middle of the corridor, his hands to his head, his eyes full of tears: "If any of her sisters treated me in this manner I should only have laughed. The youngest of them realise they are princesses. No, I should not have laughed, perhaps, as they are my mistresses. But she, she who has never quarrelled with anybody, to pick a quarrel with an old man like me—and how unjustly, how unjustly!"

Then I asked him, with emotion stronger than ever: "She is the best of the sisters?"

"She is the best of all creatures. This little one was born of the angels."

And Messer Polonius, as he calmed down, began to recount the virtues that adorned the soul of this descendant of princes, and the stories of the old major-domo were as ingenious and simple as those in the pages of the Golden Legend.



They arrived for the corpse of Monsignor. The major-domo, in his affliction, hurried away. All the bells of the historic city were tolling in unison. The Latin chants of the clergy resounded under the Palace portico and the murmur of the populace rose from the square. Four collegiate deans took the bier on their shoulders and the procession started. Antonelli gave me the place at his right and in humble tones, which to me appeared studied, began to lament the great loss to the Clementine College of this saint and scholar. I assented vaguely to everything and secretly studied the windows which were crowded with women. Monsignor was not slow

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to discover my interest and said, smiling wisely: "No doubt our city is a novelty to you."

"It is, Monsignor."

"If you remain some time with us and wish to study our artistic riches, I shall be happy to be your guide."

"My thanks, Monsignor."

We went along in silence. The sound of the bells encircled the air as the solemn chant of the clergy seemed to speak for the earth where all is dust and ashes. Ejaculations, misereres and responses fell across the bier like the holy water of the asperges. High over our heads went on the song of the bells, while the April sun, young and ruddy as a healthy youth, shone on the sacred vestments, the silken banners and parochial crosses with a brightness that was pagan in its suggestions.

Thus we passed across the entire city. Monsignor's will had arranged for his burial in the Convent of the Franciscan Friars, where the Gaetani princes had been interred for more than four centuries. There was a pious tradition which told how the Saint of Assisi had founded the Convent in Liguria and had lived there for some time. In its garden they still showed the old rose-tree that was covered with roses whenever the Divine Francis visited his foundation. The bells were intoning the dirges as we arrived. At the porch, amid the illumination of the tapers, the community waited in two long files. First the novices, pale, innocent and wasted: then the professed friars, grave, tortured and penitent. They chanted with their eyes bent down, while the yellow wax of the tapers rained upon their sandals and feet.

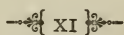
Many masses were said, a long burial service was chanted, before the body was laid in the sepulchre that had been open since dawn. The slab was lowered and then one of the

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collegiates came up deferentially to escort me into the sacristy. The friars followed us, still murmuring the psalms, as the church little by little regained its solitude and silence. In the sacristy I met many men of learning and venerable theologians with much to say that was edifying. Among them stood forth a Prior, a white-bearded old man who had passed many years in the Holy Land. He addressed me with evangelical sweetness and, asking me to sit down beside him, began to make inquiries concerning the health of His Holiness. The grave theologians gathered around to hear my account, and as there was little that I could tell them I had to invent something in his honour, in the way of a pious legend, to the effect that His Holiness was recovering his youthful vigour by means of a relic. The Prior, his eyes full of faith, asked me: "Of what saint, my son?"

"Of a saint of my family."

They all bowed to me as though I were the saint himself. The rustle of a prayer was heard through the long beards that swept mysteriously from under their hoods, and at that moment I felt a desire to kneel and kiss the old Prior's hand—that hand which had the power to sign the Cross over all my sins, with an "Ego Te Absolvo."



When I returned to the Palace I found Maria Rosario at the chapel door among a throng of beggars holding out their hands for her alms. Maria Rosario was an ideal figure among the holy daughters of princes and kings, lovely maidens whose touch alone was a potent cure for leprosy. Her soul was inflamed with the same ardours. She asked an old cripple: "How goes it with your husband, Liberata?"

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"The same as ever, dear lady, the same as ever!"

And after receiving the alms the poor old creature hobbled away, blessing her benefactor. Maria Rosario's eyes followed her a moment and then turned to another poor woman who held a squalid child to her breast: "Is it your child, Paula?"

"No, my Princess; it belonged to a neighbour who has died. The poor thing left three, and this is the youngest."

"And you have taken it in?"

"The mother begged me on her deathbed."

"And where are the other two?"

"Running the streets. One is five, the other six. They are a grievous sight, as naked as the angels of heaven!"

Maria Rosario took the child in her arms, kissing it with tears in her eyes. Giving it back to the beggar, she said: "Come here this evening and ask for Messer Polonius."

"Thank you, my lady."

A murmur like a prayer ran over the throng of pitiful beggars: "The poor mother's heart will be gladdened in heaven!"

Maria Rosario continued: "If they can find the other two, bring them also with you."

"I don't think I can find the others, my Princess."

A bald old man with a long beard, white, calm and evangelical in his poverty, gravely came forward: "The others have also found a refuge. Barberina la Prisca has taken them in; she is the old washerwoman who also gives me a roof."

The old man advanced and receded some steps leaning on his staff in a way that showed he was blind. Maria Rosario wept softly in her serene beauty like the Madonna in the midst of her court of beggars gathering round to kiss her hands. All these humble, worn and miserable faces bore an expression of love. I recalled some ancient paintings I

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had seen years before in a poor Umbrian monastery, primitive scenes painted in the privacy of his cell by some unknown monk who was enamoured of the flowery legend of the ancient Queen of Thuringia.

Maria Rosario also dreamt a beautiful legend and the white lilies of charity were as a perfume around her. She lived in her Palace as in a convent. When she went down into the garden her garments carried the scent of lavender, and as her hands applied themselves to some conventual task her mind was filled with visions of holiness. Her dreams were as white as the parables of Jesus, and her thoughts sweetened her dreams as one's fingers smoothe the soft plumage of household doves. Maria Rosario would have turned the Palace into a hospice where she might have welcomed a procession of the old and crippled, the orphaned and demented, who would have filled the chapel begging alms and reciting prayers. She sighed as she remembered the tales of the holy princesses who welcomed into their castles the pilgrims returning from the Holy Land. For she, too, was a saint and a princess. Her days passed by like silent streams that seem to carry in their depths the skies they reflect: she prayed and embroidered in the great melancholy halls; her prayers stirred on her lips as the needle swayed in her fingers, weaving the golden threads among the lilies and roses of the vestments of the altar. At the day's end, when all her small, noiseless, Christian duties were accomplished, she prayed in the darkness of her chamber with a childlike faith in the Infant Jesus that stood in his niche shining in embroidered silks and spangled with beads. A holy peace arose in her bosom like a swallow from its nest and winged its way throughout the entire palace, singing at the porch and the doors of the great salons. Maria Rosario was the one love

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of my life. Many years have gone by and in recording it here the tears fill my eyes, for all their dryness and blindness.

---XII---

The odour of the burnt tapers lingered about the Palace. The Princess lay indisposed on the couch of her boudoir. Her daughters, clad in mourning, came and went noiselessly about the room. Amid a long silence the Princess languidly sat up and, turning her still beautiful face towards me, she asked: "Xavier, when must you return to Rome?"

I was startled.

"To-morrow, my lady."

I looked over at Maria Rosario whose head was bowed, her cheeks flushed like roses. The Princess, without remarking this, leant her face on her hand, a hand that brought back memories of those of old portraits, holding, perhaps, a flower or a lace handkerchief. She sighed heavily and continued to question me: "Why to-morrow?"

"Because my mission here is ended, my lady."

"Could you not stay a few days longer with us?"

"It would be necessary to have permission."

"Then I shall write for it to Rome."

I stealthily watched Maria Rosario; her dark eyes looked at me in sorrow, and her lips, white and open under the force of her breathing, seemed to tremble. At that moment her mother turned toward her: "Maria Rosario."

"My lady."

"I want you to write in my name to Monsignor Sassoferato. I shall sign the letter."

Maria Rosario, still blushing, answered with her usual serenity: "Shall I write it now?"

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"As you wish, daughter."

Maria Rosario rose to her feet.

"And what shall I say to Monsignor?"

"Announce our bereavement and add that we are living in retirement and desire of his goodness to keep the Marquis de Bradomín with us a while longer."

Maria Rosario turned toward the door and I took the risk of whispering to her as she passed: "I am staying because I adore you."

She pretended not to hear me. I turned to the Princess who gazed on me with a glance of anxiety, and asked with an assumed indifference: "When will Maria Rosario take the veil?"

"The day is not yet fixed."

"No doubt the death of Monsignor Gaetani will delay it."

"But why?"

"Because it will cause you new troubles."

"I am not selfish. I understand that my daughter will be happy in the convent, much more happy than here, and I am resigned."

"Has Maria Rosario's vocation been long declared?"

"Since childhood."

"And she has had no uncertainties?"

"None."

I smoothed my moustache with trembling fingers: "It is a saintly vocation."

"Yes, for a saint. I might say that she will not be the first one in our family; Saint Margarita of Ligura, Abbess of Fiesole, was the daughter of a Prince Gaetani. Her body is still preserved in the Palace-chapel, and after four hundred years it looks as if she had just expired. She seems to be sleeping. Have you not gone down to the crypt?"

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“No, my lady.”

“Then you must arrange to go.”

Silence fell again. The Princess turned to her sighing and drew her hands across her brows. Her daughters conversed softly at the end of the hall. I smiled at them and they responded with a certain infantile grace that contrasted with their heavy mourning. The evening was beginning and the Princess ordered a window to be opened: “I am smothered by the odour of these flowers, my children.”

She indicated the jars of flowers on her dressing-table. Through the open window a light breeze entered the room; it was soft, perfumed and sweet as a message from the spring; its gusts stirred through the curls of the young heads down the room that regarded me with mute smiles. Ringlets brown and golden, bright adorable heads, how often my sinful dreams have recalled your beauty, as angelical as that of the cherubs in the celestial visions of holy hermits!



The Princess retired early after the evening rosary. In the half-darkened salon the conversation went on among the elder ladies who for twenty years had attended the gatherings at the Gaetani palace. The hot weather was beginning and the long glass doors leading to the garden stood open. Two daughters of the Princess, Maria Soledad and Maria del Pilar, were doing the honours; the conversation was languid in a diffident, pious way. Fortunately, when the Cathedral clock struck nine the ladies rose, and the two Marias accompanied them to the door. As there was nothing for me to do alone in the salon I went out into the garden.

It was a still, fragrant night of spring. A slight rustle

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stirred the branches of the trees and the moon lighted up the changing shadows and mysteries of the fluttering leaves. Through the garden could be felt some profound emotion as everything fell into the amorous swoon of the summer night. The stars twinkled in their upper deeps and the garden stillness seemed greater than the stillness of the skies. Far away the endless murmuring sea sighed its old complaint. The drowsy waves showed the phosphorescent tumblings of the dolphins, and a lateen sail cut across the moonlit horizon.

I went down a pathway bordered with rose-bushes in bloom; the glow-worms shone at the roots of the trees; the air was fragrant and the lightest wind would have been enough to shake the dried roses from their stalks. I was feeling the vague romantic sorrow that enchants the hearts of young lovers with the legends of great and tragic griefs clothed in the ancient forms. It seemed to me that the wound in my heart would never be cured, and I felt that it was going to decide my fate forever. I desired, in the extreme fashion of a Werther, to surpass all the lovers in the world who through their loyalty and misfortunes have passed into history and shown their tearful faces even in popular song. Unfortunately, I was unable to surpass them, for such romantic notions were never more than a perfume shed across my young adventures. Fleet and gentle illusions that lasted but an hour and then left nothing to me but sighs—sighs, in truth, for the rest of my life—sighs and smiles of pensiveness.

My thoughts made swift revolutions. The Cathedral clock struck midnight and each stroke went through the garden like a majestic wave. Against the window-panes trembled the reflection of the moon. I entered the darkened salon where the moonlight was shining on the face of a clock that also rang out the midnight hour in a silvery tone. I stopped at the

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door so as to grow accustomed to the obscurity, and little by little my eyes were able to locate the position of things. There was a woman seated on the sofa. I could only make out her white hands. Her form was clothed in black. I tried to come closer, when she noiselessly rose and disappeared. I would have believed that my eyes had been deceived by some phantom if she had not sighed so heavily as she fled. At the foot of the sofa had fallen a handkerchief perfumed with roses and damp with tears. I had no doubt that the vision was no other than Maria Rosario.

I was awake all night, unable to sleep. I saw the dawn come through the windows of my bedroom and at last, amid the light tinkling of a little belfry, I managed to get to sleep. On awakening I found the day well advanced, and I discovered what a profound interest the Princess Gaetani took in my soul's welfare. She was afflicted to hear that I had risen too late to attend Divine Worship.

—❧ XIV ❧—

At nightfall the two ladies with the white hair and the black grosgrain silk arrived once more. The Princess raised herself up to receive them, addressing them in a weak but amiable voice: "Where have you been?"

"We have been all over Liguria!"

"You have!"

At the Princess's surprise the two ladies exchanged smiles: "You tell the story, Antonina."

"You tell it, Lorencina."

Both began together to give an account of their time: they had heard a sermon in the Cathedral; they had called at the Convent of the Carmelites to ask after the health of the

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Mother Superior; they had visited the Blessèd Sacrament. Here the Princess interrupted:

“And how was the Mother Superior?”

“She does not come down to the parlor yet.”

“Whom did you see?”

“We saw Mother Scholastice. You cannot imagine her concern, poor dear creature, for you and your children! She showed us Maria Rosario’s habit; they were ready to send it so that she might try it on. It is her own handiwork; the last she will make, she says, for she is losing her sight.”

“I did not know that she was nearly blind.”

“Not blind, exactly, but she sees very poorly.”

“But she is not old enough for that.”

The Princess finished speaking with a gesture of fatigue and put her hands to her forehead. Then she was distracted by a figure at the door. It was the major-domo, Messer Polonius, making his profound reverence: “With permission, my Lady Princess?”

“Come forward, Polonius. What has happened?”

“The sacristan of the Carmelite Nuns has come with the little Princess’s habit.”

“Does she know about this?”

“She is now trying it on.”

On hearing him the other daughters, who were seated in a circle embroidering a cloak for Saint Margarita of Liguria, put their heads together and hurried out of the apartment, lightly chattering like a chaste springtime group painted by Sandro Botticelli. The Princess looked after them in maternal pride and then with a sign dismissed the major-domo who, instead of leaving, advanced some steps to say: “I have given the last touches to the ‘Group of the Three Falls.’ To-day the Holy Week processions will begin.”

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The Princess replied somewhat haughtily: "Can you believe we have forgotten it?"

The major-domo seemed embarrassed: "Heaven keep me from such a thought, my lady."

"Well, then."

"In speaking of the processions, the sacristan of the Carmelites asked me if those that are at the expense and under the patronage of the Lady Princess would come out this year."

"And why not?"

"On account of the death of Monsignor and the family mourning."

"But that has nothing to do with religion, Polonius."

Here the Princess sighed again. The major-domo bowed: "Certainly, my lady, most certainly. The sacristan said the same thing when he saw my work, the 'Group of the Falls', you know. I trust my lady will consent to examine it."

The major-domo paused and smiled ceremoniously. The Princess assented with a nod and, turning, remarked to me lightly: "Perhaps you do not know that the major-domo is a great artist?"

The old man gave a little bow: "An artist! To-day there are no artists. They belong to the ancient days."

My youthful boldness seized me: "But to what period do you belong, Messer Polonius?"

The major-domo smiled back: "You are right, Excellency. Properly speaking I cannot say that this is the century to which I belong."

"You belong to the most classical and remote antiquity. What art do you pursue, Messer Polonius?"

Messer Polonius replied with the utmost modesty: "All of them, Your Excellency."

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"You are the grandchild of Michael Angelo!"

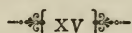
"To pursue them is not to say that one is a master of them, Excellency."

The Princess smiled in a way that showed her amiable irony and her aristocratic compassion for the old major-domo: "Xavier, you must see his latest work; the 'Group of the Three Falls'; it is a miracle!"

The two old ladies joined their hands together in ecstasy: "If he had only been able to study in Rome in his youth. Oh!"

The major-domo began to sniffle: "Ladies—my noble Mæcenases!"

The voices of the children were heard approaching, and in a moment the five daughters thronged into the apartment. Maria Rosario had put on the white habit which she was purposing to wear throughout her life, and the others were gathered about her as though she were a saint. At the sight the Princess sat up very pale; her eyes filled with tears in spite of her efforts to contain herself. When Maria Rosario approached to kiss her hand, she threw her arms around her neck and embraced her lovingly. Then she paused to gaze on her, emitting a slight cry of pain.



I was so upset that I listened to the old major-domo as if I were in a dream. He was speaking after a long silence: "If I might merit the honour. You will pardon me, but they are about to take my poor work away. If you consent to see it, there are still a few moments—."

The two old ladies rose and smoothed out their rustling gowns: "Oh, let us go at once."

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Messer Polonius, even before starting, began his explanations: "I must tell you that the Christ and the Cyrenian are the original figures of the old group. Only the Jews are from my hand. They are made of pasteboard. You know my old hobby for making masks—the worst of crazes! I added greatly to the liveliness of our carnival, which is really a feast of Satan. Here nobody had ever used masks, but as I gave them away for nothing every one was arrayed in my pasteboards. God forgive me! The carnivals of Ligura became famous throughout Italy. This way, Your Excellencies."

We entered a long hall with the windows closed. Messer Polonius hurried to open them. Then, offering a thousand pardons, he allowed us to advance. In the centre of the room stood a litter holding Jesus of Nazareth and four fiercely bearded Jews. The two old ladies burst into tears:

"When we consider what Our Saviour suffered for us!"

"Alas, when we consider it!"

In presence of these four Jews in their gaberdines it was evident that these devout ladies felt the full effect of the drama of the Passion. Messer Polonius ran around the litter tapping the fierce heads of the executioners with his knuckles: "Of pasteboard! Yes, ladies, just like my masks! I don't know where I got the idea."

The ladies jointly declared:

"A divine inspiration!"

"Inspiration from on high!"

Messer Polonius smiled on: "Nobody, absolutely nobody, believed I would realise my idea. They made sport of me. Now they are coming back with congratulations. I pardon their sarcasms. I have had a plan in my head for over a year!"

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The ladies seemed deeply moved:

“Inspiration!”

“Inspiration!”

Jesus of Nazareth, disordered, livid, bloody and bending under the weight of his cross, seemed to pierce us with his tender glance. The four Jews in their red habiliments crowded around him threatening. The first one was blowing a trumpet; those on either side of Christ bore instruments of torture and the others followed, holding up to the people the sentence of Pilate. It was a piece of music and the majordomo took occasion to remind us that in the time of the gentiles the scribes used hieroglyphics very like those in music. Turning to me with doctoral gravity, he went on: “To this very day the Jews and the Moors write in a similar manner. Is it not true, Your Excellency?”

As Messer Polonius reached this learned climax there arrived a sacristan leading four devotees who were to carry the famous Group of the Falls to the church of the Capuchins. Messer Polonius threw a covering over the litter and helped them to raise it, following them to the door: “Be careful! Don’t collide with the doorposts! Careful!”

Tears were dried and a window was opened to watch them carry it off. The first thing the sacristan did was to study the skies, which were threatening. Then he took his place at the head of his band and started off. The four devotees began to trot, shaking the litter violently under its covering on their shoulders. Messer Polonius turned to us: “Without compliments—how did it strike you?”

The two ladies were as usual unanimous:

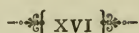
“Edifying!”

“Edifying!”

Messer Polonius smiled beatifically and, twisting his old

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figure—the figure of a dominie enamoured of the Muses—held his hand out of the window to see if it was raining.



That night the daughters of the Princess gathered in the moonlight on the terrace; they were like sprites in the fairy-tales as they surrounded a beautiful young friend who from time to time gazed on me in curiosity. In the salon the older ladies were carrying on a discreet conversation, smiling at the sound of the young voices that came in eddies with the perfume of lilies from the openings on the terrace. The garden stretched out motionless in the moonlight which wove magic over the pallid tops of the cypresses and the balconies, where a peacock was spreading his fantastic fan of feathers.

I tried at various times to approach Maria Rosario. It was useless; she divined my intentions and cautiously and noiselessly defeated them with her eyes lowered and her hands crossed on the conventual scapular she was already wearing. The sight of her timidity so aroused flattered my pride as a Don Juan, and sometimes merely to torment her I would pass from one side to another. The poor child prepared for flight on the instant. I would pass apparently without seeing her. I had all the impetuosity of my twenty years. Again I would enter the salon and approach the old ladies who received my attentions with the timidity of damsels. I remember I was once talking with the devout old Marquise de Tésara when intuitively I turned my head toward the white form of Maria Rosario, and suddenly found my saint had gone.

A cloud of gloom came over me; I left the elderly lady and hurried to the terrace. I remained a long time leaning on the marble baluster, gazing on the garden. A nightingale was

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singing amid the silent perfume and its voice seemed to harmonise with the fountains. The moon shone down the path of roses I had followed the night before; the breeze was light and soft as though it carried sighs and would murmur them far among the myrtle groves and over the stirring waters of the pool. With Maria Rosario's face in my memory I incessantly asked myself: "What does she think? What does she think of me?"

Light clouds gathered about the moon and followed her on her fantastic journey; suddenly in a heap they blinded her and left the garden in darkness. The pool lost its gleam among the still myrtles; only the tops of the cypresses held the light. As if to harmonise with the darkness a breeze arose and swept in a great gust across the scene, bringing the scent of scattered roses. I returned to the Palace; one of the windows was lighted up and a strange presentiment caused my heart to palpitate. The window was raised only a little above the terrace and the wind was waving its curtains. It seemed to me that a pale shadow crossed the room. I wished to draw closer but the sound of steps on the avenue of the cypresses held me back; it was the old major-domo walking in his dreams of art. I stood still in the depths of the garden. Gazing on her lighted window, my heart repeated: "What does she think? What does she think of me?"

Poor Maria Rosario! I believe she was in love and yet her heart forewarned her of some strange confused adventure. I wished to lose myself in my amorous dreams but the croak of a frog, monotonously sounding under the arching cypresses, distracted and disturbed my thoughts. I remember that as a child I had read many times in my grandmother's prayer-book that the devil used to take the form of a frog to interrupt the devotions of a holy monk. It seemed natural that

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the same thing should occur to me. I, the calumniated and misunderstood, was just such another mystical gallant as Saint John of the Cross! In the flower of my youth I would gladly have given up all other earthly glories to be able to inscribe on my cards: "The Marquis de Bradomín, Confessor of Princesses."



In lapses of love who is there without sin? I am convinced that it is always the best who are tempted by the devil. That night the horned monarch of the depths inflamed my blood and beat my flesh with the threshing of his tail. I was crossing the terrace when a brisk wind suddenly lifted the curtains and my mortal eyes beheld inside the kneeling form of my Maria Rosario. I don't know what came over me. I believe that I felt at first an ardent impulse and then one that was cold and cruel, the boldness admired in the lips and eyes of that portrait of high Cesare Borgia painted by the divine Raphael Sanzio. I looked around me; I listened for a moment; both garden and palace were in silence. Creeping cautiously to the window I sprang within. The saint gave one cry, then, as softly as a flower bends to the breeze, she fell in a swoon and lay with her face to the floor. I shall never forget her hands, white, cold and diaphanous as the host!

Seeing that she had fainted, I raised her in my arms and carried her to her bed, which seemed like an altar of white linen and ruffles. Then in precaution I put out the light. The room was completely black, so that I had to grope my way. I had reached the edge of the couch and felt the white texture of her nun's habit, when the sound of steps on the terrace turned my blood to ice and I stood motionless. Invisible hands raised the curtains and moonlight fell across the room.

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The steps ceased; a heavy shadow was outlined against the window. The shadow bent as if to pierce the darkness of the room and then straightened up again. The curtain fell and I heard the sound of departing steps. I had not been discovered. Motionless, breathless, exhausted, I stood like a statue. From time to time the curtain waved to and fro; a ray of clear moonlight lighted up the room; and with amorous starts my eyes beheld the white bed and the white figure that lay on it like a form on a sepulchre. I took fright and crept to the window. The frog continued his croaking under the cypresses, and the damp, shadowy whispering grove seemed to be his kingdom alone. I leapt from the window like a burglar and stole along the terrace wall. Suddenly I thought I heard somebody following me. I stopped to look around but the immense shadow of the palace fell across the terrace and garden, and I could make out nothing. I went along and had taken only a few steps when a warm breath stole against my neck and the point of a dagger pierced my shoulder. I swung around quickly; a man was hastily concealing himself in the garden. I recognised him, half in anger, half in fear, as he crossed a streak of moonlight; to avoid scandal I did not follow. More than the wound, it hurt me not to be able to punish him; but this was impossible. I entered the Palace feeling the warm blood running down over my body. My servant Musarelo, sleeping in my ante-chamber, awoke at my step and lighted the candles. He gave a military salute and said: "Your orders, my Captain."

"Come to me, Musarelo."

I had to lean against the door to keep from falling. Musarelo was a veteran who had served me since my entrance into the Noble Guard. I said quietly: "I am wounded."

He stared at me with frightened eyes: "Where, señor?"

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“In the shoulder.”

Musarelo raised his arms and shouted with the religious frenzy of a fanatic: “It is some treachery!”

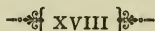
I smiled, for Musarelo believed it was not possible for any man to wound me face to face: “Yes, it was treachery. But bandage me up and let nobody come in.”

The soldier began to tear off my blood-stained shirt. On finding the wound his hands trembled: “Don’t be nervous, Musarelo.”

“No, my Captain.”

All the time he went on bandaging me his lips kept muttering: “We shall get this ruffian!”

But it was impossible to get him. The assassin was under the Princess’s protection and perhaps at that very moment was giving her a report on the action of his dagger. Tortured by that thought, I passed a feverish night. Lost in strange imaginings, I longed to know what was to come. I still remember how my heart trembled like the heart of a child when I found myself facing the Princess Gaetani.



It was at the entrance to the library and, on account of the shadows, I had fancied myself alone when I heard the Princess exclaim: “What infamy! What infamy!”

From that instant I was certain that the noble lady knew all, and strangely enough my fears entirely deserted me. With a smile on my lips as I brushed my moustache, I went into the library.

“I chanced to hear you and did not wish to pass without a greeting.”

The Princess was as pale as death: “I thank you.”

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Standing behind the lady's chair was the major-domo whose eyes, as I could see in the obscurity, pierced me sharply. The Princess was bending over a book. Throughout the vast hall silence hovered on chill wings like an ill-omened bat. I realised that the noble lady desired to wound me with her scorn and, irresolute, I remained in the middle of the hall. My pride rose now and then but I kept a smile on my trembling lips. Conquering my malice, I approached her gallantly: "Is my lady ill?"

"No."

The Princess kept turning the pages of her book and there was another long silence. At last, with a profound sigh she rose from her seat, saying: "Let us go, Polonius."

The major-domo threw me a side glance that reminded me of the old Bandelone as he drew up his treacherous papers in company with Luigi Straza.

"At your orders, Excellency."

The Princess, without looking at me, crossed the great hall of the library followed by the major-domo. I felt the affront, but was still able to control myself and said: "Princess, perhaps they have told you how they wounded me last night."

My voice, which was affected by nervousness, had a sort of feminine plaintiveness that seemed to strike the heart of the Princess with fear. I saw her pallor as she stopped to gaze at the major-domo. Then she said coldly, hardly moving her lips: "You say they wounded you?"

Her eyes met mine and I felt a hatred in their round orbs that was like the glance of a serpent. For a moment I believed she was about to call on her servants to expel me from the Palace, but she hesitated at the idea of such an affront and scornfully pursued her way toward the door, where she half

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turned to say: "Oh, there has been no letter granting you permission to remain in Ligura."

I replied smiling, without releasing her eyes from my own: "One should write another letter."

"Who?"

"The one who wrote before, Maria Rosario—."

The Princess had not looked for such boldness and she trembled. My dashing, youthful manner gave the violent thrust a satanic grace. The Princess's eyes filled with tears and, as they were still beautiful, my heart, with a touch of knight-errantry, felt remorseful. Fortunately the tears merely welled up in her eyes; she had the heart of a great lady and knew how to conquer herself. Her lips folded into their conventional smile, her features were calm, and she looked on me with an air of amiable indifference, serene and reserved as the statues in some village church benevolently surveying the faithful. Stopping at the door, she asked me: "Where did this happen?"

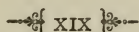
"In the garden, my lady."

Standing on the threshold, the Princess heard my whole story. She listened without surprise, without moving her lips or making a gesture. Her immobility was intended to affront my boldness and, knowing her intention, it gave me pleasure to watch her attitude as I spoke. My last words were delivered with a sweeping courtliness, but I did not dare to kiss her hand: "Adieu, Princess. Let me know if you receive advices from Rome."

Polonius was making secret signs of horns with his fingers to protect him against the evil eye. The Princess remained silent. I crossed the library on my way out. Meditating whether or not to leave the Gaetani Palace, I resolved to stay. I wished to show the Princess that when others grew desperate

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I knew how to smile, that where others could be humiliated I could triumph. Pride has always been my besetting virtue.



I remained all day in my chambers. I was as weary as if I had taken a long journey; my eyelids were dry and feverish, and I felt my thoughts like curling serpents dormant within me. At times they awakened and twirled about in silent indecision. I had no thoughts to unfurl like eagles great wings of conquest and pride. My will seemed weakened, I felt myself conquered and I wished to steal alone from the palace. Such doubts were contending within me when Musarelo entered: "My Captain, there is a Capuchin father here to see you."

"Tell him that I am ill."

"I have told him so, Excellency."

"Tell him I am dead."

"I have told him so already, Excellency."

I looked at Musarelo standing before me in humorous impassiveness: "Then what does the father want?"

"To recite the responses with your Excellency."

I was about to reply when a hand lifted the stately velvet curtain. "Pardon my intrusion, young cavalier."

An old man clothed in the hood and cloak of the Capuchins stood on the threshold. His venerable appearance imposed respect.

"Enter, reverend father."

Approaching him I offered a chair. The Capuchin refused to sit down and his silver beard was stirred with a grave and saintly smile. He repeated: "Pardon my intrusion."

His pause gave Musarelo the time to leave us as he con-

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tinued: "Young cavalier, pay strict attention to what I am telling you, and may heaven keep you from scorning my advice. That might even cost you your life. Promise me that when you have heard what I shall say, you will not ask to know more, as it will be impossible for me to tell you. You will understand that my religious state imposes on me a duty that every Christian must respect. You are a Christian!"

I replied, with a deep bow: "I am a great sinner, reverend father."

An indulgent smile spread over the Capuchin's face: "All of us are that, my son."

Then, with his hands joined, his eyes closed, he remained a moment in meditation. Under his heavy eyebrows his eyes could barely be seen behind their discoloured yellow lids. After a moment he spoke: "My words and authority are not to be questioned, but it is no common interest that brings me into your presence. My one guide is an overwhelming inspiration and I have no doubt that it is your Guardian Angel who enlists me to save your life, not being able to communicate with you directly. Now tell me if you are impressed and if I can give you the information I carry in my breast?"

"Doubt no more, reverend father. Your words have inspired me with something like terror. I swear to follow your directions if they do not in any way conflict with my honour as a cavalier."

"You speak well, my son. I also hope that in charity, happen what may, you will speak to nobody about your poor Capuchin."

"I promise it on my faith as a Christian, reverend father. But speak, I implore you."

"This very day at nightfall, go through the garden gate and follow the wall. You will come to a little house with a

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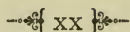
bull's head fastened under the eaves. Knock there. An old woman will open the door; say that you wish to speak to her. On hearing this she will admit you. It is probable that she will not inquire who you are, but if she does, give her a false name. Once within the house, ask her to listen to you and impose secrecy on her for all that you are to confide. She is poor and you can be liberal with her to secure the utmost service. You will see that she will at once close her door in order to speak with you privately. You can then give her to understand that you are resolved to recover the ring and all that she has received with it. Do not forget this: the ring and all she has received with it. Threaten her if she refuses, but make no uproar nor cause her to seek assistance. Persuade her by offering her twice as much money as the others have given to destroy you. I am sure you can get her to do what you wish and that it will cost you very little. But even if it is much, your life ought to be worth more to you than all the gold of Peru. Do not ask me more, for I cannot tell you. Now before I leave, tell me if you are disposed to follow my advice."

"Yes, reverend father, I shall follow the inspiration of the angel that sent you to me."

"That is well."

The Capuchin signed a benediction on the air and I bowed my head to receive it. When he had gone, I confess I had no inclination to laugh. With surprise, almost dread, I discovered that a ring was missing from my finger, a ring carried for many years which I was wont to employ as a seal. I could not recall how I had lost it. It was an old ring and bore the escutcheon of my family engraved on an amethyst; it had belonged to my grandfather, the Marquis de Bradomín.

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I went down into the garden where the martins were flying about in the blue of the twilight. The myrtle paths, old and deep and silent, seemed to invite me to meditation and forgetfulness among the fresh breezes that wafted the perfume of humble flowers hidden like virtues in the shadows. Muffled and constant came the rumble of the fountains shielded in their mosses under the myrtles, the laurels and the boxwood. There seemed to issue from the solitary garden some mysterious vibration, some strange emotion, oppressing my heart. I strolled under the cypresses that shed a cloak of shadows from their peaks. Afar off, as through a succession of porches, I caught sight of Maria Rosario seated beside a pool reading a book. I followed with eyes fixed upon the lovely vision. Hearing my step, she raised her head and, blushing deeply, dropped it again and continued reading. I drew back, expecting her to take flight, and could not gather in my mind the delicate words of greeting that were appropriate to the eucharistic grace of her liliated whiteness. Seeing her seated beside the pool amid this bosque of old box-wood, her book open on her knees, I felt sure that Maria Rosario interpreted my invasion of her room as the figment of a dream. After a moment she raised her head, and her eyes with trembling lids turned a furtive glance at me. Then I said: "What are you reading here so quietly?"

She smiled timidly: "The Life of the Virgin Mary."

I took the book from her hands and, yielding it to me with an added blush on her cheeks, she said: "Be careful or the dried flowers between the leaves will fall out."

"I shall be careful."

I opened the book devoutly, catching the delicate fragrance

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it emitted in its holiness. I read in a low voice: "The Mystical City of Sister Maria de Jesus, called de Agreda."

I handed it back to her, and as she received it she asked without looking at me: "Do you know this book?"

"I know it well, for my spiritual father used to read it when he was a prisoner in the Piombi of Venice."

Maria Rosario murmured in confusion: "Your spiritual father! Who is your spiritual father?"

"The Cavalier de Casanova."

"A Spanish nobleman?"

"No, a Venetian adventurer."

"An adventurer?"

I interrupted to say: "He repented at the close of his life."

"Did he become a friar?"

"He had no time, but he left his written confessions."

"Like Saint Augustine?"

"Exactly. But in humility, as a Christian, he did not wish to compete with that doctor of the Church, so he called them Memoirs."

"You have read them?"

"They are my favourite reading."

"Are they very edifying?"

"Oh! There is much to be learned from them. Jacques de Casanova was the great friend of a nun of Venice."

"Like Saint Francis and Saint Claire?"

"Even more intimate."

"What order did she profess?"

"The Carmelites."

"I am going to be a Carmelite too."

She blushed in silence, her eyes fixed upon the pool that completely reflected her. It lay deep amid the moss and rippled softly as a prayer in its cloistered hollow under the

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arches of antique box. I bent over the surface and, as if I were talking to the reflection upon it, I murmured: "And you, when you have entered the convent, you will be my friend."

Maria Rosario drew up quickly: "Silence! Silence, I beg of you!"

She was pale and joined her hands in anguish as she looked at me. I was so moved that I could only bow and ask her pardon. She insisted: "Silence, otherwise I cannot stay and talk with you."

She raised her hands to her face, covering it for a moment. I saw that her whole body was trembling. Suddenly she uncovered her face and declared in a tragic voice: "Your life is in danger here! Leave this very day!"

She then hurried to meet her sisters who were coming down the narrow myrtle path, one behind the other, chattering as they plucked their flowers for the altar. I stole softly away. The day was beginning to decline, and over the armorial irons of the gate two doves that were playing took flight at my approach. There were bright ribbons bound around their necks, tied no doubt by their gentle mistresses whose hands wrought only blessings upon earth. Violets clustered in the crannies of the old walls and two chameleons were basking in the last rays of sunlight on the dry, yellow, lichen-covered stones. I opened the grille and stood for a moment gazing over the garden with all its green loveliness and signorial repose. The setting sun was reflected in the tower windows where the martins were gathering in a black flock, and in the stillness came the evening voices of the fountains and the laughter of the five sisters.

Following the wall outside the garden I reached the little house with the bull's head under the eaves. An old woman

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was knitting in the open doorway and some flocks of sheep were passing down the road amid clouds of dust. The old woman rose as I approached: "What do you want?"

At the same time the avaricious hag moistened her thumb against her withered lips and went on with her knitting.

I replied: "I have something to say to you."

On seeing the two sequins in my hand, she smiled obsequiously: "Pass inside. Pass inside."

The house was in complete darkness, so that the old woman had to grope her way to light the rustic lamp. Hanging it on a nail, she turned to me: "Let me hear what you wish, good cavalier."

Her smile showed the toothless cavern of her mouth. I indicated by a gesture that she should close the door; she obeyed, first searching down the road where a tardy flock was straggling along to the sound of its sheep-bells. Then she came and sat beside a little table under the lamp, joining her hands on her bony knees: "From my spells, I know that you are in love, and that it is not your fault; you are unhappy. You should have come sooner, so as to have had the remedy sooner."

Hearing her speak in this way I saw that she wished to pass for a witch, and I was not surprised when I recalled the words of the Capuchin. I remained silent for a moment, and the old woman, waiting for my reply, fixed her astute, distrustful eyes upon me. Suddenly I whispered: "You might as well know at once, madam witch, that I am here simply to obtain the ring they have stolen from me."

The old woman drew herself up in horror: "What are you saying?"

"That I am here for my ring."

"I haven't got it. I don't know you."

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She sprang to open the door but I held a pistol to her breast and she backed into a corner, sighing. Then, without moving, I said: "I am ready to give you twice the money they have offered you to weave the spell. So instead of losing you will gain by giving me the ring and all you received with it."

She came and sat down again under the lamp which, as it swayed, lighted up at one moment her parchment face and hands, and at the next left her figure entirely in the dark. Whiningly, she murmured: "I shall lose five sequins, but you will give me double, when you know. Now I see who you are."

"Then tell me who I am."

"You are a Spanish gentleman in the service of the Noble Guard of His Holiness."

"Don't you know my name?"

"Yes, wait a moment."

And she bowed her head in an effort to recall it. I saw words on her lips which I could not hear. Then she said: "You are the Marquis de Bradomin."

I judged that the time had come to show her the ten sequins which I had promised her. The old woman was whining: "Excellency, I should never have procured your death; I would only have destroyed your virility."

"Explain yourself."

"Come with me."

She led me behind the black and broken screen dividing the house and concealing the hearth, where some sulphur was smoking in the dying fire. I confess I was rather astonished at the sight of these mysterious evidences of a witchcraft that was capable of destroying a man's virility.

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—❧ XXI ❧—

The witch had unhooked the lamp; she lifted it over her head so as to show me the whole cabin which hitherto had been lost in the darkness. In the wavering light I could distinguish among the black rafters the forms of crocodiles' bones arranged in crosses, shining crystals, nails and hooks. She put the lamp on the floor and bent down in the ashes: "See, here is your ring."

She brushed it off in her skirt before handing it to me.

"Why have they sent this ring to you?"

"To complete the spell it was necessary to have a stone you had carried for many years."

"And how did they get it?"

"While you were sleeping, Excellency."

"And what were you going to do with it?"

"What I told you first. They wanted to deprive you of your manly strength. You would have been like a new-born infant."

"How could you do this?"

"I shall show you."

She went on stirring the ashes and at last uncovered a wax figure hidden at the bottom of the brazier. This little fetich, the work no doubt of the major-domo, bore a queer resemblance to myself. Examining it, I burst into laughter, while the witch muttered: "You may laugh now! But it would have been very sad for you if this figure had been dipped in the blood of a woman, as my lore tells me to do. Still worse if I had melted it in the embers."

"Was that all?"

"Yes."

"Here are your ten sequins. Now open the door."

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The old woman looked at me shrewdly: "You are going, Excellency? Is there nothing you want from me? If you give me ten more sequins I shall make the Lady Princess mad for love of you. Don't you wish that, Excellency?"

I answered dryly: "No."

The old woman took up the lamp and opened the door. I went out on the road, which was now completely deserted. Night had fallen and large drops of rain made me hasten my steps. As I went, my mind turned back to the Capuchin father who had had such specific knowledge of all these things. The garden gate was locked, so I had to make a roundabout journey. Nine was striking from the Cathedral clock when I reached the Romanesque arch that leads into the Court of the Gaetani Palace. The balconies were illuminated and the church of the Dominicans was pouring out a procession with tapers bearing the "Group of the Last Supper." I still recall these processions filing along sad and solitary in the noise of the storm. There were processions at daybreak, afternoon processions and midnight processions. The sodalities were numberless. Holy Week was a famous time in this old pontifical city.

—❧ XXII ❧—

The Princess neither spoke nor looked at me during the evening gathering. Afraid that her disdain would be observed, I decided to retire; so with a smile on my lips I approached the noble lady, took her hand and kissed it, making her feel the decided pressure of my lips. I saw her cheeks growing paler and the glint of hatred in her eyes; nevertheless, I was able to bow gallantly and ask permission to retire. She replied coldly: "You are master of your wishes."

"Thank you, Princess."

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I observed the dead silence as I left the salon. I felt humiliated and realised that it was impossible for me to stay any longer in the Palace. I retired into the library, pursued by this thought; listening to the rain beating against the window-panes, I felt a dolorous anxiety, a senseless impatience with myself, with the hour and all that surrounded me. I saw myself a prisoner in the library and reconsidered with clearness and firmness all that had occurred to me during the day. I wished to make up my mind, but my thoughts refused to take any pattern; my will seemed to have been frittered away, and all my force was gone.

They were hours of indefinable torture. Tempests of senseless rage swept over my soul. As before an abyss I drew back from the mysterious intrigues plotted against me in the perfumed shadows of the great salon. I vainly strove to conquer my pride, to convince myself that the high and honourable thing to do was to leave the Gaetani Palace that very night, in spite of the storm. I felt myself seized by a strange agitation and realised there was no force that could conquer it—that all these animal instincts that were dominating me could be nothing less than furies and venomous serpents. Gloomily I felt that my malady was incurable, that my will was powerless to control the temptation to do something bold and irreparable. It was the dizziness of the abyss of perdition!

In spite of the rain I opened the window. I needed the fresh air. The skies were black. A wild gust swept around my head. Some birds, far from their nest, had taken shelter under the ledge and scattered the rain from their chilled plumage as they flew off with plaintive cries. There was a sound of chanting from some distant procession. The doors of the neighbouring convent stood open and within could be seen the brightly lighted altar. The worshippers came out of

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the church and gathered under the arches of the plaza to await the arrival of the procession. The images came along slowly between two files of tapers down the narrow street. The plaza was crowded with a throng, chanting hymns. The rain redoubled its force on the umbrellas; the patter of feet in the puddles contrasted with a feminine note of white petticoats that swept like the foam of the tempest beneath the black garments. The two old ladies of the black and rustling grosgrain came out of the church and tiptoed across the plaza, in order to watch the procession from the Palace windows.

Great pools of water blackened the pavement of the plaza. I felt my cheeks wet with drops which gave me the feeling of tears. Suddenly the balconies were lighted up and the Princesses and their ladies appeared on them. The rain came down in torrents just as the procession reached the archway. I watched it from the library balcony, my face battered by the wet wind. First passed the Brotherhood of Calvary, silent under their hoods. Then came the Brothers of the Passion in yellow cassocks, with tapers in their hands; next appeared the images, "Jesus in the Garden of Olives," "Jesus before Pilate," "Jesus before Herod," "Jesus Bound to the Column." Under this wintry, chilling rain they appeared sad and desolate indeed. The last to arrive was the "Group of the Three Falls." Regardless of the rain, the women threw themselves upon their knees on the streets and in the balconies. I heard the excited voice of the major-domo:

"There it comes! There it comes!"

It passed, but how differently from the time when we had seen it within the palace walls! Under the rain the four Jews had lost all their ferocity. The cardboard heads had shed their paint; the bodies had softened and the legs looked as though they were about to crack at the knees. The four

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Jews now seemed like penitents. The two old ladies in their black grosgrain, seeing a miracle in this, murmured unctuously:

“Edifying, Antonina!”

“Edifying, Lorencina!”

The rain poured down without ceasing and from one of the empty balconies was heard the murmur of a pair of turtle-doves, charming in its poetry and mystery. A withered old woman in mourning was kneeling behind her window between two tall lighted candelabra. My eyes searched for Messer Polonius, but he had disappeared.

—❧ XXIII ❧—

Shortly after, as I was meditating gloomily and bitterly in my chamber, there came a knock on the door and the hoarse voice of the major-domo roused me from my dreams: “Excellency, this document.”

“Who has brought it?”

“A post has just arrived.”

I opened the paper and threw a glance over it. Monsignor Sassoferrato ordered me to report in Rome. Without finishing it, I turned to the major-domo with an air of scorn: “Messer Polonius, let them prepare my post-wagon.”

The major-domo asked hypocritically: “Is his Excellency about to leave us?”

“Within an hour.”

“Does the Princess know this?”

“You may have the opportunity of telling her.”

“It will be an honour, Excellency. You know the postillion is ill. It will be necessary to get another. If you desire it, I shall procure another suitable for the task.”

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The old man's voice and glance awakened my suspicion. I decided that it would not do to trust such a man, and remarked: "I shall look after my own postillion."

He made a profound bow and prepared to retire, but I detained him: "Listen, Messer Polonius."

"At your Excellency's orders."

Each time he bowed with more respect. Silently I fixed him with my eye. I seemed to be unable to ruffle his composure. Advancing a step, I said: "As a remembrance of my visit I wish you to keep this stone."

And smiling I took from my finger the ring that bore my arms on its amethyst. The major-domo looked at me with startled eyes: "I beg your pardon!"

And his trembling hands pushed back the ring. I insisted: "Take it."

He bent his head and took it tremulously. With a lordly gesture I pointed to the door: "Now leave the room."

The major-domo reached the threshold; then, crushing down his cowardice, he murmured: "Keep your ring."

With a servant's impudence he threw it on a table. I gazed on him threateningly: "I dare say you do not wish to go out through the window, Messer Polonius."

He drew back, exclaiming energetically: "I understand your intention. It is not enough for your vengeance that you have destroyed my group of the four Jews with your witchcraft; with this ring you wish to put a blight upon me as well, I shall have you delated to the Holy Office."

He fled from my presence, making the sign of the Cross as if he were escaping from the devil. I could not help laughing loudly. I called for Musarelo and ordered him to find out the truth about the postillion. But Musarelo had drunk

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so much that he was unfit for the task. All I could discover was that the postillion and Musarelo had been supping with Messer Polonius.



What a sad memory that day has become to me! Maria Rosario was filling the flower-jars of the chapel at the end of the salon; when I entered she stood undecided for a moment. With a timid, ardent light her eyes looked in fear on the door and back again at me. As she was filling the last jar, a rose broke over her hand. I smiled and said to her: "Even the roses die in kissing your hands."

She also smiled, seeing the petals between her fingers, and gave a slight sigh as they drifted away. We remained silent. It was nightfall, and the sun shone in its last golden glow upon the window. The cypresses lifted their pensive points in the twilight azure below. Within, one could hardly make out the arrangement of things; throughout the salon the roses scattered a perfume as light as the light words that died away with the sun. My eyes sought the eyes of Maria Rosario with the hope of imprisoning them in the shadows. She sighed heavily as though for want of air, and drawing back her locks with both hands from her forehead she took refuge by a window. I was afraid to assist her, and without following her merely said after a long silence: "Are you not going to give me a rose?"

She turned and answered softly: "Would you like one?"

I hesitated a moment and then drew nearer. I managed to appear calm, but I could see her hands trembling over the jars as she selected the flower. With a sorrowful smile she said: "I shall give you the most beautiful one."

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She continued to search among the roses. I sighed romantically: "The loveliest would be your lips."

She drew back and looked at me in pain: "You are not kind. Why do you say such things to me?"

"To see your anger."

"And that delights you? Sometimes I think you are the devil."

"The devil does not know what love is."

Silence fell again. I could hardly make out her face in the dying light, and I only knew from her soft sobs that she wept. I came closer to console her: "Oh! forgive my faults."

My voice was tender and passionate. I myself as I heard it felt its strange seductive power. The supreme moment had arrived; my heart was seized with anxiety over the great adventure that faced me. Maria Rosario closed her eyes in dread, as though she were on the brink of an abyss. Her colourless lips expressed a painful voluptuousness. I seized her hands, which were lying inert. She abandoned them to me, sobbing in her grief: "Why do you take pleasure in making me suffer? You know that everything is impossible!"

"Impossible! I know I shall never obtain your love! I know I do not deserve it! Only I want you to pardon me and to know that you will pray for me when I am far away."

"Silence! Silence!"

"I regard you as so high, so far above me, so ideal, that I want your prayers as I should want those of a saint."

"Silence! Silence!"

"My heart suffers, without a single hope. Perhaps I may learn to forget you, but your love will always be a purifying fire."

"Silence! Silence!"

There were tears in my eyes and I knew that with tears

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the hands may show some boldness. Poor Maria Rosario seemed pale as death and I thought she was about to faint in my arms. This maiden was really a saint; seeing the extremity of my grief she did not wish to show me any more cruelty. She closed her eyes and murmured in agony: "Leave me! Leave me!"

I whispered to her: "Why do you abhor me so?"

"Because you are the devil!"

She gazed at me in terror, and as if the sound of my voice were awakening her she broke from my arms and fled toward the window, which was golden with the sunset. She leaned her forehead against the glass and sobbed. From the garden came the song of the nightingale, stirring in the twilight some innocent memory of holiness.



Maria Rosario called to the smallest of her sisters who appeared at that moment in the doorway with a doll in her arms. She called her with a nervous energy that lighted up the roses on her cheeks: "Come in! Come in!"

She stretched out her hands from the window-seat. Without stirring, the child held up the doll to her: "Polonius made it for me."

"Come and let me see it."

"Can't you see it from there?"

"No, I cannot see it here."

Maria Nieves at last made up her mind to enter. Her curls floated over her shoulders like a cloud of gold. She was gentleness itself, with the light gay movement of a bird. Maria Rosario, seeing her approach, smiled amid her blushes and welling tears. She bent down to kiss her and the child

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threw her arm around her neck and whispered in her ear: "Do you think you could make a dress for my dolly?"

"If you would like one."

Maria Rosario held her to her side, smoothing her hair. I could see the fingers tremble as they melted into the soft tresses. In a low voice I murmured: "Why do you fear me?"

Her cheeks reddened: "I am not afraid."

And her eyes—never have I seen, never shall I see, others like them—turned a timid, loving glance upon me. We were hushed by emotion as the child began to tell us the history of her doll: she was called Yolanda and she was a queen. They made a crown for her when they finished her costly robe. Maria Nieves chattered without stopping. Her voice rippled on with the light melody of a fountain. She told me about all the dolls she had owned, and wanted to tell the story of each of them; some had been queens, others shepherdesses. They were long stories, very confused and with many repetitions; the child's tales were as extravagant as those of the three sisters Andara, Magalona and Aladina in the enchanted garden of the ogre. Suddenly she ran away. Maria Rosario hastened to call her: "Come back! Don't go away!"

"No, I am going."

Maria Rosario's eyes followed her beseechingly as she ran, her golden hair streaming behind her. Again she called: "Don't go away!"

"All right, I shan't go."

The child answered from the end of the salon. Maria Rosario took the opportunity to say to me earnestly: "Marquis, leave Ligura."

"That would mean giving up seeing you."

"But may not this be the last time? To-morrow I am to enter the convent. Marquis, listen to my request!"

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"I wish to suffer here. My eyes have forgotten how to weep, and I want them to weep when they see you take the habit, when they cut off your tresses, when the grille closes on you. Who knows but in seeing you consecrated by the vows, my earthly love may be changed into a pious devotion! You are my saint."

"Marquis, do not utter these impieties."

I closed my sad eyes, which were filled with supplications and strengthened with the tears of the purest prayer. The child seemed to be forgotten as she sat, singing her doll to sleep with an old lullaby. In the darkness of the vast apartment, amid the heavy perfume of the roses, the song of the child had all the enchantment and old-time gallantry that died away with the last notes of the minuet.



Like a sensitive flower, Maria Rosario trembled under my gaze. I divined on her lips the desire to tell me something and the fear of doing so. Suddenly she looked at me in anxiety, her eyes turning as though they were coming out of a dream. Stretching out her arms to me, she said almost with violence: "Leave this very day for Rome. There is danger threatening you and you must protect yourself. You have been delated to the Holy Office."

I repeated her words without concealing my surprise: "Delated to the Holy Office?"

"Yes, for witchcraft. You have lost a ring and recovered it by diabolical arts. So they say, Marquis."

I added with irony: "And what says your mother to all this? It is she—."

"No."

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I smiled sadly: "Your mother abhors me because you love me!"

"Never! Never!"

"Poor child, your heart fears for me, foresees the dangers around me and wishes to protect me!"

"Be silent, in pity. Do not accuse my mother!"

"Perhaps she does not carry her cruelty so far as to accuse you? Does she believe you when you swear that you did not see me that night?"

"Yes, she believes me."

Maria Rosario had ceased to tremble. She drew herself up immaculate and serene as the martyrs before the wild beasts of the Roman circus. I insisted, sadly, tasting the last dolorous bitterness of the executioner: "No, you were not believed. You know this very well. How many tears have your eyes shed in secret!"

Maria Rosario drew back into the hollow of the window: "You are a sorcerer! What they say is true! You are a sorcerer!"

Then she started to run away, but I held her back: "Listen to me."

She stared at me in fear, making the sign of the cross: "You are a sorcerer! Please let me go!"

I murmured in desperation: "Do you also accuse me?"

"Then tell me, how did you know?"

I gazed on her for a while in silence till I felt the spirit of the prophets descending on me.

"I knew it because you prayed that I should know it. I had a dream in which everything was revealed to me."

Maria Rosario breathed heavily. At another time she would have tried to escape and I should have tried to hold her.

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Now, resigned and without strength, she looked down the salon calling the child: "Come, sister, come!"

She held out her arms as the little one ran to her; she pressed her to her breast, lifting her from the floor, but hardly able to hold her she sat down on the window-seat. The rays of the sunset lighted up the child's golden hair; its silken mass fell in a perfumed wave over the young shoulders. I sought in the dark for Maria Rosario's hand: "Cure me!"

Drawing it away, she answered: "But how?"

"Swear that you hate me."

"I cannot do that."

"Or love me."

"Nor that either. My love is not of this world!"

Her voice was so sad in these words that I felt the voluptuous sensation of pure tears falling on my withered heart. I bent over to feel her breath and murmured passionately: "You belong to me. Into your very cell I shall follow you with my earthly affections. Merely to live in your memory and prayers, I would gladly die."

"Silence! Silence!"

Maria Rosario stretched out her hands towards the child shining on the bench beside her in the last glow of the sunset like an angel in a cathedral window. The memory of the moment still gives me the chill of death. Before our startled eyes the window opened in a silence that denoted the invisible force of a fatal, cruel destiny. The form of the little one rested a moment on the window-seat, outlined against the blue heaven and the waking stars, and then plunged into the garden below while her sister's arms reached out in vain to catch her.

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—{ XXVII }—

“It was Satan! It was Satan!”

Still resounds in my ears that cry of Maria Rosario. After all these years I see her, pale, divine and tragic as an ancient statue; I can still feel the horror of that hour.

“It was Satan! It was Satan!”

The child lay senseless on the terrace steps. Her face among the curls looked white as a lily and her wounded forehead was streaked with the blood oozing through the gold. Her sister, like one possessed, groaned: “It was Satan! It was Satan!”

I lifted the child in my arms and her eyes opened for a moment full of sadness. The bleeding head lay inert on my shoulder and the eyes closed again in agony. The cries of the sister resounded across the garden: “It was Satan! It was Satan!”

That golden head, that head of light, as fragrant as a garden, was now black with blood. I felt a weight on my shoulder bearing me down with the burden of a tragic destiny. I went up the staircase as the chorus of anguished sisters came out to meet me. I heard their cries and laments and felt the dumb interrogation of their pale faces and frightened eyes. Their desperate arms were held out to receive their sister's body and they bore it into the palace. I stood motionless, unable to follow, looking at the blood on my hands. From within the apartment there came the lamentations of the sisters and the cries of one wildly repeating: “It was Satan! It was Satan!”

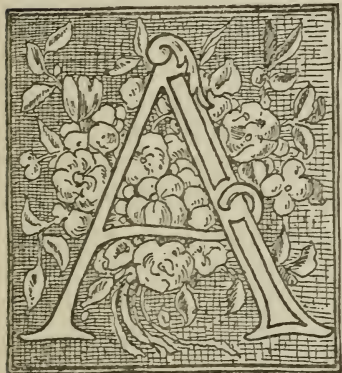
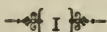
I was seized with fear. I hurried down to the stables and with the aid of a groom harnessed the horses to the post-

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wagon. I fled at a gallop. Before disappearing under the arch of the court I turned my tearful eyes for a farewell to the Gaetani Palace. In the still open window appeared a tragic, desolate figure. Poor creature, aged, wrinkled, timorous, still wandering through those rooms and still imagining that I am lurking in the shadows! They tell me that, even to-day after all these years, she still repeats, no longer with any feeling of grief, but with the monotony of an old woman's prayer: "It was Satan!"



Sonata of Summer



NXIOUS to forget some unhappy love affairs, I resolved to travel over the world on a romantic pilgrimage.

Woman holds in my life's history a gallant, cruel, glorious place like those held in general history by Thaïs of Greece and Ninon of France, courtesans less beautiful than their destiny. Theirs indeed is per-

haps the only destiny that is to be envied. I should have held it an equal, if not a greater fate, to have been born a woman; then I might have achieved what I have never been able to do. For women to be happy it is enough to have no scruples, and I dare say the fantastic Marquise de Bradomín had none. With God's permission she behaved like all the gentle marquises of my time, who went to confession every Friday and sinned on all the other days. Many of them, of course, have repented and remain beautiful and

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tempting, never imagining, as they feel the approach of old age, that one touch of contrition is enough.

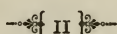
In these days of my sentimental wanderings I was young and something of a poet, without experience but not without my whims. I firmly believed in many things which to-day I hold in doubt; and, free of all scepticism, I gave free rein to the enjoyment of my existence. Though I should not confess or perhaps even be conscious of it, I was happy with that indefinable felicity which comes from being able to love all women. Without being a Don Juan, I have lived a passionately amorous life, full of hearty youthful love and constant physical passion. I have never known the decadentism of the newer generations. To-day, after so much sinning, I still have my triumphant morrows, and I can only smile as I think of the far-away times when I used to weep over the death of my heart, dead from jealousy, longings and love.

As I had made up my mind to travel, the first thing was to decide where to go; submitting to a romantic impulse, I turned to Mexico. I felt rising in my bosom, like a Homeric song, the adventurous tradition of my family. One of my ancestors, Gonzalo de Sandoval, had founded the Government of Nueva Galicia in that country; another had been the Inquisiter-General, and the Marquis de Bradomín still held the remnants of a royal grant tied up in the papers of a legal contest. Without further considering the matter, I resolved to cross the ocean, drawn by the legend of Mexico's ancient monarchies and cruel divinities.

I set out from London where I had lived since the treachery of Vergara and made the voyage in a small sailing frigate, the "Dalila," which was later shipwrecked on the coast of Yucatan. Like the adventurers of early days I intended to lose myself in the wastes of the old Aztec Empire, with its

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undecipherable history, among the buried mummies of its kings, the cyclopean fragments of its lost civilisations, its religions and vanished races, remote in its mystery as in its distance from the East.



Although we had the pleasantest of weather during our crossing I was so love-sick that I hardly left my berth or exchanged a word with any one. My voyage was undertaken to help me to forget, but I found my cares so engrossing that I could not get them out of my mind. This was aggravated by the fact that the frigate was English and the crew and passengers heretics and traders.

How different my first voyage had been in that Genoese bark which carried travellers from all parts of the world! I remember how on the third day out I became intimate with a Neapolitan prince, and not a damsel showed signs of sea-sickness but my hand was ready to support her; how I delighted to join the gossip under the shadow of the piles of canvas, chattering Italian with the Greek merchants with their red fezzes and sleek black moustaches, or lighting my cigar in the long pipe of the Armenian missionaries. There were people of all sorts, gamblers who looked like diplomats, singing-girls with fingers covered with rings, shaven priests smelling of musk, American generals, Spanish bull-fighters, Russian Jews and English milords. An exotic jumble whose lingo brought on a sort of dizziness and nausea. This was on the Eastern seas *en route* for Jaffa.

The mornings in the tropical forests when barking acaques and flocks of green parrots hail the sun have often recalled the decks of the Genoese bark with its Babel of types, costumes and languages; but more, much more clearly come back those

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opiate hours we passed on board the "Dalila." On every side were red and freckled faces, yellow hair and treacherous eyes. Heretics and traders on the decks, heretics and traders in the cabins! It was enough to drive one to despair. Nevertheless, I bore it patiently. My heart was dead, so dead that neither the trumpet of the Last Judgment nor the battle of light castanets could arouse it. Since my spleen had laid me low I had become another man. I clothed myself in black, and in the presence of the ladies, even the plainest, I assumed the gloomy air of a sick, sepulchral poet. In the solitude of my cabin I gave myself over to profound meditation, reflecting how few men possessed the fortune to weep over an infidelity that would have inspired the song of the divine Petrarch.

In order not to see that mob of Lutherans, I hardly raised my head from the pillow. Only when the sun went down did I go out and seat myself in the stern, where, free from interruption, I might pass my hours watching the wake of the frigate. The waters of the Antilles with their tremulous, transparent breast fascinated me like the eyes of green and slippery sprites in crystal palaces at the bottom of lakes. I thought continually of my first voyage. Far away on the blue horizon where those happy hours had passed, I beheld the fantastic design of my old pleasures. The rhythmless, symphonic lament of the waves awoke in me a world of memories; fading faces, echoing laughter, the murmur of strange languages, the applause and flutter of fans mingling with the Tyrolian song of Lili in the mirrored cabin. It was a revocation of sensations, a luminous incantation of the past, somewhat ethereal, brilliant, covered with gold-dust like the memories brought to us at times in dreams.

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Our first port in Mexican waters was San Juan de Tuxtlan. It was the middle of the morning, I remember, under a blazing sun that scorched the wood and softened the tar as we dropped anchor in the polished silver waters. Indian boatmen, bronzed like antique metal, assailed the frigate on both sides, holding up from the canoes their strange merchandise of carved coco-shells, palm-leaf fans, and walking-sticks of tortoise shell before the eyes of the travellers leaning over the gunwales. My eyes studied the rocks of the harbour, half hidden among the trees, and discovered a group of naked lads who were diving and swimming great distances, chattering and shouting at one another. Some remained resting on the rocks with their feet in the water; others climbed up to dry themselves in the sun that shone obliquely on their graceful bodies, nude as on some frieze of the Parthenon.

To vary the monotony of life on board I decided to go ashore. I shall never forget the three mortal hours of the passage from the frigate to the land. Overcome by the heat I passed all this time in the bottom of the canoe, which was propelled with exasperating slowness by an African. Between my half-closed lids I watched his coal-black body sway to and fro above me in the sickening motion of the oars; at times he smiled at me with his monstrous lips or whistled a stave of some religious song, just three musical notes like those made by savage tribes when they are charming dangerous reptiles to sleep. Thus my voyage might be compared to one on Charon's ancient bark: a blazing sun, white chalky cliffs, the sea dull and motionless, and the air like the breath of Vulcan's furnace.

A little breeze was stirring as we reached the shore, and

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the sea, which had been like lead, began to ruffle. To take advantage of this wind after three long days of calm, the "Delila" was in haste to weigh anchor. I had only a few hours in which to run through the Indian village. Of San Juan de Tuxtlan and its sandy streets I have only a sleepy, confused recollection, like that of a book of sketches turned over lazily in the hammock during a siesta. As I close my eyes the memory reawakens and details appear. I again feel the sharp thirst and the dust; I recall the coming and going of Indian sandals as silent as phantoms; I hear the voices of creoles clothed in the gracious simplicity of classic statues, with their hair loose, their shoulders bare, their bodies barely covered by shirts of transparent silk.

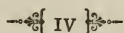
At the risk of the frigate's departure, I produced a horse and set out for the ruins of Tequil. An Indian youth served me as guide. The heat was insupportable. Taking to a gallop I crossed the broad plains of the hot country, endless fields of henequen and sugar-cane. Across the horizon stretched a line of volcanic hills covered with thick green bushes. On the plains the evergreens raised their branches like giant umbrellas, and seated around them some Indians were eating a miserable meal of tamales.

We followed a dusty red track, the half-naked guide running beside my horse. We reached Tequil without a single stop. Among its ruined palaces, pyramids and gigantic temples I beheld for the first time an extraordinary woman whose Indian servants, or rather slaves, called her softly Niña Chole. She seemed to be the Salammbô of these palaces. She was journeying toward San Juan de Tuxtlan and was resting among her court of attendants in the shadow of one of the pyramids. She had the exotic bronze beauty and the strange sinuous grace of the nomad races, a hieratic and serpentine

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figure recalling those priestesses, daughters of the sun, that lend to the old Indian poems a sacerdotal and voluptuous enchantment. She was dressed like the creoles of Yucatan, in a loose white hipil embroidered in coloured silks, the native dress that resembles the classic tunic, and a short Andalusian skirt which, in the lands that yesterday were Spain's, they still call by the dashing old name of *fustan*. Her black hair hung free, her hipil covered a classic bosom. Unhappily, I was able to catch only rare glimpses of her face as she turned towards me, but Niña Chole had the exquisite attitudes of an idol, the ecstatic, sacred quietude of the Maya race, a people so old, so noble, so mysterious, that it seems to have come here from the depths of Assyria. But in missing the face I did not neglect to study the body which her dress did not quite conceal, and I yielded all my admiration to the luxurious modelling of her shoulders and the turn of her neck. Heaven help me, but it seemed as if her body, bronzed by the sun of Mexico, exhaled some languid effluvia, and that I breathed and drank and was intoxicated by them.

An Indian servant led up the palfrey of this Salammbô; she addressed him in the old language and smilingly mounted. Then seeing her face to face, my heart gave a great bound. She had the same smile as Lili, that Lili whom I still loved and yet abhorred.



There was an Indian hut in the midst of the ruins and there I rested and slept in a hammock tied to a giant cedar that stood near the door. The plain melted away in an amorous silence stirred only by the sighs of an ardent night-fall. The odorous breeze of the tropical twilights caressed my forehead. The whole land seemed to be stirring at the

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approach of a nuptial hour and from its virgin bosom came a warm breath as of some enamoured negress full of desire.

Worn out by fatigue, heat and dust, I slept like an Arab relaxing in his dreams of paradise. Need I say that the seven hours sent me by the Prophet were seven creoles clothed in fustan and hipil, with the smile of Lili and the glance of Niña Chole? In fact, this Salammbô of the palaces of Tequil had begun to occupy too much of my thought. I realised this with fear, convinced that I was going to end in an infatuation for her lovely eyes—inevitably, if I was never to see them again. Fortunately, these women who so suddenly captivate us do not appear more than once in our lives. They pass like dreams clouded in the mystery of an ideal twilight. If they returned, the enchantment would vanish. Why should they return when one glance has given us all the secret melancholies of love!

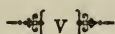
O romantic illusions, poor figments of the ideal evoked by a few hours of travel! Who ever reaches old age without having had his heart swept by a caress of your white wings? My heart cherishes so many loves like this! Even to-day, a prematurely old man with white hair, I cannot recall without sadness the face of a woman seen one morning between Urbino and Rome, when I was still in the Noble Guard of His Holiness: a pale breathing dream of a figure that floats down the past and sheds over my youthful memories the ideal perfume of dried flowers found among a lover's letters and love-locks, exhaling from some old chest the faithful secret of his early loves.

Niña Chole's eyes had awakened in my soul these distant memories that were light as gossamer, white as the flooding moonlight. Her smile that recalled Lili had inflamed my blood with a tumult of desires and the vague old yearnings

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for love returned to my breast. Rejuvenated and happy even in my melancholy, I sighed for living lovers even as I intoxicated myself with the April roses twining about my ageing trunk. My heart, so long dead, felt in the youthful sap stirring through it anew the desire for my old sensations; it plunged into the misty past and drank of the pleasures of memory, the pleasures of a dying man who has loved much in many corners of the world. Alas, how delightful was that thrill which the excited imagination imparted to the nerves!

As the night spread over the plains with her shadows, so full of passionate promise, the great birds of the dark winged their way through the ruins. I rose and called to my Indian guide and the ancient echoes of the palaces replied. With the horse already bridled he appeared from behind a great idol carved in red stone. I mounted and we set out. There was a gleam across the horizon. A vague odour of the sea, of weed and tar, greeted the traveller on the plains and far away to the East a grove glowed like fire amid the crimson stretches. Savage, luxurious Nature, panting with the evening heat, seemed to sleep like some wild breeding animal. In these shadows, alive with nuptial whispers and fire-flies dancing through the tall grasses, there seemed to breathe a soft delicious essence—that essence brewed by the spring in the calix of flowers and the heart of man.



Night was advancing as we entered San Juan de Tuxtlan. I dismounted and, giving the reins to the guide, I turned down a lovely street leading to the shore. With my face to the sea-breeze I resolved to find out if the frigate had weighed

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anchor. I was busy with this thought when I overheard across my shoulder the soft step of bare feet. An Indian wrapped in a sheet approached me.

"Can I not do something for *mi amito*?"

"Nothing, nothing."

The Indian started to turn away: "Do you not wish me as a guide, *niño*?"

"I don't wish anything."

He gloomily adjusted the sheet that served him for a cloak and went his way. I followed my path to the shore. Again the meek and humble voice of the Indian reached my ear. I turned and found him close behind me. He had run back and, reaching me, murmured: "You will certainly be lost, *niño*, if you don't know the sand-banks."

The man was beginning to bother me and I resolved not to answer him. This may have encouraged him, for he followed me some distance down the road. After a moment's silence he added in a tone of mystery: "Wouldn't you like me to take you to a little darling, master? A little filly, fifteen years old, lives near by. You should go with me, friend, and see her dance the *jarabe*. It is hardly a month since the ranchman of Huaxila seduced her—Niño Nacho, perhaps you know him."

Suddenly he stopped and planted himself in front of me with a spring as if to bar my advance. He bent over with his hat in his hand for a shield, while the other arm, with a narrow shining blade, stretched out threateningly behind him. I confess that I jumped back. The surroundings were certainly appropriate for such a performance: marshy sands hemmed in by black puddles and an evil-looking group of huts with the light trickling out through the crevices. I might have permitted him to rob me if, instead of being so cour-

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teous, the thief had spoken out boldly and menacingly, swearing to cut out my heart and drink my blood. But there were no curt, commanding threats, and I heard him murmuring in his slavish voice: "Do not move, *mi amito*, or you will be wounded."

To take it in and recover myself was the work of an instant. The Indian drew himself together like a wildcat about to spring on me. Already I could feel his cold steel; but horrified as I was at the idea of dying from a dagger, I suddenly felt strong and daring. My voice shook slightly as I advanced a step towards the rogue, apparently to resist him: "Off with you before I kill you."

The Indian did not move. His slavish voice seemed full of irony: "Don't be too bold, man. If you wish to pass, here is your chance if you empty out your silver on this rock. Come, hand it over, hand it over!"

At another time I should have been afraid of the shining dagger. But I muttered resolutely: "We shall see about that, you thief."

I was carrying no arms, but in the ruins of Tequil an Indian who was peddling jaguar skins had sold me his club which had captivated my fancy by the oddity of its design. I still have it; it is like the sceptre of some negro king, Oriental and at the same time simple and primitive in its patterns. I fastened on my goggles, examined my club, and with a quiet step advanced toward the thief who gave me a pass that was intended to wound me in the side. Luckily the moonlight showed me the danger, and I was in time to avoid it. I have a confused recollection that I tried to disarm him with a blow on the head and a stroke on the arm, but the Indian dodged me with the dexterity of a savage. After that I knew nothing. My memory of the inci-

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dent is as painful as a nightmare: the marsh lighted by the moon, the black ooze in which our feet were sinking, the strain of the muscles, the dimmed vision, the Indian's advance and retreat as he bent his body and leapt with the fantastic fury of a maddened cat; and, just as the club slipped from my hand, the flying flash of the dagger darting over my head and fixing itself like a wriggling silver serpent in the trunk of a tree formed in a cross of twisted branches.

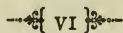
Dazed, I stood for a moment not knowing what was happening. Then, as if through a heavy mist, I saw a door in one of the huts furtively opened and two men came out for a look at the shore. Fearing another encounter like the first I hurried down along the harbour road. I arrived just as a rowboat was putting off for the frigate. I called to them to return for me. Once my foot was aboard I exclaimed: "What luck!"

Recounting my adventure with the Indian, I suddenly changed the subject and repeated: "What luck! I thought the 'Dalila' had sailed."

The mate, like a good sailor with few words, shifted the rudder and, without turning his head, answered in bad Spanish: "Not till to-morrow night, sir."

He threw off his cloak and, doubling up his body like a rider who wishes to help his horse, shouted: "'Way, all!"

Six oars dropped into the sea and the boat shot off like an arrow.



I took to my cabin immediately on coming on board and lay down in extreme fatigue. Hardly had I shut out the light when the venomous desires that had coiled all day around my heart lifted their devouring fangs. At the same time

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I was filled with a great melancholy and a sense of confusion and mystery. It was the melancholy of sex, the germ of human sorrow. The memory of Niña Chole followed me with the stubborn uncertainty of a butterfly's wing. Her Indian beauty, her sacerdotal air, her serpentine grace and sybilline glance; the sweep of her body, her disquieting smile, tiny feet and flowing shoulders, all that the eye could mark or the mind divine was as a blazing fire to my flesh. In my fancy the glorious proportions of this bronze Venus had flowered amid zephyrs and pierced their first veils, full, fresh, luxuriant and fragrant as roses of Alexandria abloom in the tropical gardens. So vivid was my imagination that at times I believed I was breathing in tides of perfume the voluptuous air of her garments.

Little by little, weariness pressed on my eyelids as the monotonous beat of the waters drew me into an amorous dream, a feverish, restless symbolism of my life. I awoke in the morning, my nerves strained as though I had passed the night in a hot-house of exotic plants, amid rare, penetrating, aphrodisiac perfumes. From above me came the sound of confused voices, the soft patter of bare feet and the murmurs of a great coming and going. They were washing the decks. I got out and went up on the bridge, breathing in the odours of tar and rigging. At such an hour the temperature is delightful; the air is full of agreeable movement, and the horizon smiles under the beautiful sunrise.

Swathed in the rosy vapours of the dawn a small boat approached us over the sea, as white and silvery as a seagull or Venus's classic swan of pearls. There were six rowers at the oars; under a canvas tent raised in the stern a white-clad figure was resting from the sun. As the boat drew up towards the gangway of the frigate I had the curious sense of an im-

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pending adventure. A woman came out and sat down near the helm. The awning concealed her face from me, all but the bottom of her skirt and her little feet coquetting in high-heeled slippers of white leather; but my intuition warned me, "It is my Salammbô from the palaces of Tequil!" Yes, it was she, lovelier than ever under the slight covering of her silk shawl. Her red creole lips were smiling with the disquieting grace of an Egyptian or Turanian. Her eyes, shaded under their lashes, showed a trace of mystery, of the fantastic and far-away, something that recalled the noble old races which in vanished ages had founded the empires of the sun. The boat touched the side of the frigate and, half in fear, half in amusement, the creole seized hold of the giant negro's wool as he lifted her easily and carried her up the steps of the gangway. Once on deck, the negro let her down and retired to join the boatswain.

I went into the cabin where they would have to pass. Never has my heart beat more violently. I remember that the cabin was deserted and barely lighted. The dawn was still faint in the windows. After a moment's pause, there came the sound of voices and chatter; a more daring ray of sunrise lighted up the room and there in the mirrors I caught the reflection of Niña Chole's face.

—❧ VII ❧—

It was one of those solitary, sultry days of calm that never seem to end; only now and then came a breath to stir the ropes and ruffle the sails. I wandered about keeping watch in the hope that Niña Chole would show herself on deck again. In vain, for Niña Chole kept to her cabin and the hours oppressed me with unusual weariness. Cheated of the

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smile that I had seen and loved on other lips, I turned to my seat in the stern.

On the sleeping emerald of the sea the frigate left a trail of bubbling ripples. There came to my mind, I know not whence, an old American melody that Nieves Agar, my mother's friend, used to sing me years before when I was a fair-haired little treasure, nestling in the arms of the ladies during the evening parties in the Bradomín Palace. This desire to rest in the arms of ladies is still strong within me. Poor Nieves Agar, how often have you held me on your knees and rocked me in time to that slow *danzon*, which told of a creole maid more beautiful than Atala who slept in a silken hammock in the shade of the coco trees! The story of some other Niña Chole!

All evening in this melancholy mood I remained under the jib that hung loose over my head. When the sun went down a little breeze arose and, with all her sails swelling, the frigate swung around the island of Sacrifices and anchored in the waters of Vera Cruz. My soul was filled with religious emotion as I gazed on the burning shore where, first of the races of old Europe, the Spaniards, sons of Alaric the barbarian and Tarik the Moor, had left their adventuring ships. I beheld the city they had founded, reflected with all its brave tradition in the still, leaden deeps, as if meditating on the journeys it had caused the white man. On one side, above its desert granite cliffs, the Fortress of Ulua related to the waters the romantic tale of a feudal past they had never known; and in the distance spread the mountain of Orizaba, white as an old man's head, outlined irregularly against the limpid blue skies. I recalled the almost forgotten stories of my youth, tales half-historical that made me dream of the regions of the sun, fictitious scenes of copper-tinted men, solemn and silent,

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virgin forests peopled with birds of brilliant plumage, and women like Niña Chole, ardent and dark, the ideals sung by a poor poet in the passionate style of olden days.

It is impossible to renounce one's fatherland, and I, a Spaniard and a gentleman, felt my heart swept with enthusiasm, my mind peopled with glorious figures and my memory swollen with the great deeds of our history. My exalted fancy recalled the picture of that old adventurer from Estremadura setting fire to his ships, his troops scattered over the shore looking back over their shoulders as they marched ahead, their long moustaches arched in the brave old martial style, their grim masculine faces, tanned and rusted like figures of some ancient painting. I was about to land on that sacred shore, following my wandering moods and losing myself, perhaps forever, in the vastness of the old Aztec empire. I felt the spirit of the adventurers rising in my soul, the spirit of the gentleman and Christian, the august re-echoing of history!

Hardly had we anchored when the fleet of harbour-boats hurried out to meet us; it was composed principally of light skiffs and canoes. From afar came the monotonous sweep of their oars; then hundreds of heads appeared over the sides of the frigate and a strange crowd swarmed in disorder between decks. The invaders spoke in Spanish, English and Chinese. The passengers were hailing the boatmen by signs to draw near; they bargained and settled their prices and, one by one, like the slipping beads of a rosary, passed down the gangway to the canoes that awaited them. Then the flock disappeared and in the distance only a tiny figure or two could be distinguished by the motion of the arms and the echo of the voices sounding far across the mighty silence of this parched world. Not a single head was turned to give the

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vessel a glance of farewell. They set off with one engrossing desire, to reach the shore; they were gold-seekers.

Night came on. With twilight, my burning desire for Niña Chole seemed to grow calmer and purer with almost the vague anxieties of an ideal, poetic love. The shadows darkened slowly; the breeze whispered, the moon glistened forth in the dark blue that was now turning to black, a solid black in which the stars took on an unusual limpid sheen. It was the American night of the poets.

—❖ VIII ❖—

I had gone down to my cabin and lay stretched in my berth smoking my pipe and dreaming no doubt of Niña Chole, when the door opened and my mulatto, Julio César, appeared. He was a little fellow who had been turned over to me in Jamaica by a Portuguese voyager and was later to become a general and official in the Republic of Santo Domingo. Julio stood under the curtains of the doorway and said: "*Mi amito*, a darky is coming on board who kills sharks under water with a jack-knife. Hurry, *mi amito*, don't lose any time."

He disappeared as quickly as some Ethiopian jailor of princesses in enchanted castles. With my curiosity aroused, I hurried after him. I reached the bridge which was now lighted up by the full moon. A giant negro whose garments were dripping water towered like a gorilla above the crowd of passengers that were gathered around him, smiling and showing his white animal teeth. A few steps away two sailors were hoisting a half-beheaded shark over the starboard side. Suddenly the cable gave way and the shark disappeared in the splashing water. The negro tightened his elephantine lips and muttered: "Clowns!"

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He turned away, leaving on the deck the black marks of his wet footprints. From above came a feminine voice: "Look here, *moreño*."

"I am coming, *horita*—without delay."

A woman's form was outlined against a doorway. Was it she? How could I have failed to know it? What had happened to you, my heart, that you did not tell me of her presence? How gladly I would have thrown you under her feet in punishment! The negro approached her.

"Would Niña Chole desire anything of me?"

"I want to see you kill a shark."

The black man smiled like a savage and fixed his eyes on the waves which were glittering in the moonlight.

"It is impossible, *mi amita*; the sharks have gathered in a school, you see."

"And you are afraid?"

"Why not? You can see well enough that it's hardly safe just now. My lady can scarcely ask—"

Niña Chole did not allow him to finish: "How much have these gentlemen given you?"

"Twenty testoons; two centens, you know."

The boatswain overheard this answer as he passed to give some orders, and with the bluntness of a weathered seaman he declared, without opening his lips or turning his head: "Four pieces, and don't be a hog!"

The negro stood irresolute; he looked over the starboard side and studied the sea for an instant; the blurred stars were trembling on the waves where silver, phosphorescent fish twirled in gleaming trails and lost themselves in the flooding moonlight. In the shadow of the vessel could be distinguished a formless mass of the gathering sharks. The diver turned away to reflect, then came back once or twice to study

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the waters again as if he were troubled by their nocturnal meaning. Flicking off the ashes of his cigar, he turned to her: "Four centens, if you please, *mi amita*."

Niña Chole, with the patrician disdain of the rich creoles for the negroes, raised her head like an Indian queen, and in a tone so indolent that the words seemed scarcely to pass from her lips, murmured: "Go ahead! I promise you four centens."

The negro's swollen lips parted like an ogre's in an avaricious, sensual smile; he took off his shirt, unbound his knife from his belt, and putting it between his teeth like a Newfoundland dog he placed himself on the gunwale. The sea reflected his naked frame of polished ebony. Bending over to examine the depths, he waited till the sharks were gathered near the surface, then dove through the moonlight head first into the sea. As the sharks sank after him, every eye glanced sharply at the vortex which, before it disappeared, revealed a red tide of blood as, amid the hurrahs of the sailors and the loud applause of the passengers, the woolly head and body of the diver showed on the surface; he was swimming with one arm while the other held a shark with the head half cut off. They rushed to hoist up the negro, throwing him the first lines at hand; but just as his body was half in the air a terrible scream was heard as he threw out his arms in despair and fell back in the fangs of the sharks. I was standing overcome with horror when I heard over my shoulder a voice saying: "Will you give me room, señor?"

Some one touched my shoulder and, turning my head, I saw it was Niña Chole. The same restless smile was hovering on her lips as she opened and closed her hands where she held several gold coins. She asked mysteriously for my place, and bending over the side she tossed the money as far as she

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could. Then she addressed me with a slight bend of her body: "That will pay his fare on Charon's boat!"

I must have been as pale as death, but as her smiling eyes fastened upon me my senses overcame me and my still trembling lips answered her queenly smile with the smile of a slave who recognises his master. The cruelty of the creole filled me with horror, while it attracted me at the same time; never before had she seemed to me so tempting and beautiful. Over the sea breathed murmurs and perfumes, touched by the white moonlight with a quality of enchantment. The negro's tragic death, the blank terror on every face, the violin lamenting from the cabin, everything, under that moon, in that tropical night, filled my passion with a subtle depravity.

Niña Chole moved away with the rhythmic, sinuous motions of a tiger, and as she disappeared I was seized by a cruel suspicion. Up to this moment I had not noticed that beside me was standing a handsome, fair-haired young man whom I had noticed on our landing at Tuxtlan. Could it have been for him that her lips had given that smile which seemed to hold asleep some ancient licentious cult, cruel and diabolical?



With the first light of dawn the frigate landed us at Vera Cruz. I was seized with fear of that smile, the smile of Lili which now was tempting me on other lips. I feared those lips, the lips of Lili, fresh, red and fragrant as cherries in our garden, which were so promising in their offers. If one's poor heart is sometimes generous and hospitable to love, ready to count its scanty joys and suffer its innumerable sorrows, there is cause for fear when the eyes and lips that glance and smile are those of some Niña Chole. So I trembled, and I

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would tremble now, for all the wintry snows that the years have left unmelting on my head.

At other times I have felt this terror of loving, but once the passion has fastened upon me my resistance has vanished from my heart as from that of some romantic damsel. Weakness of heart, mocked ceaselessly by my tenderness and filling all my life with troubles! Experience has proved to me to-day that only great saints and great sinners possess the strength necessary to conquer temptations of the flesh. On this occasion alone, I confess, was I able to resist offering my breast for love to rest on and brush me with its wings. For this reason, perhaps, destiny was determined to prove the real temper of my soul.

When the small boat had carried us from the frigate to the shore, another skiff appeared, decked out with flags and pennants; and as I observed it closely I distinguished Niña Chole in the white figure that sprang from its prow to the shore. No doubt destiny had written that I was to be tempted and to fall. There are martyrs from whom the devil delights to pluck away the palms and I, unfortunately, have always been one of these. I have passed through the world like a saint who has slipped away from the altar; but I have had the good fortune to find beautiful, pious hands to bandage my heart. Looking to-day on my old wounds and remembering my defeats, I can almost console myself. When I was young I remember reading a history of Spain that taught me that it was possible to make defeat as glorious as victory.

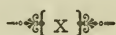
On landing at Vera Cruz my heart was full of heroic sentiments. In the eyes of Niña Chole I seemed as proud and haughty as a *conquistador* of old times. Here in former days my ancestor Gonzalo de Sandoval, founder of the government of Nueva Galicia in Mexico, had shown no greater reserve

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with the Aztec princesses, his prisoners; and no doubt Niña Chole was like one of them, in love with being outraged and conquered, for she always looked at me with long glances and her sweetest smile was ever for me. Her lips parted like the rose petals scattered by slaves at the triumphant entry of some victor. And yet I persisted in my disdain.

Across the golden sand of the shore we journeyed, my black slave and I, side by side with Niña Chole and her Indian servants. A flock of ugly dark buzzards flew by, almost descending on our heads, with a tireless spreading of wings that hid us from the sun. Their wild fanning brushed my face; they skimmed along the ground, and mounted swiftly into the sky. The great flock made a fantastic turn above us and settled in a black mass upon the Moorish roof-tops, breaking under their weight the branches of the cocoanut trees on the shore. They had an ominous look, these birds, with their leprous heads, stubby wings and dark, lustreless plumage. There were hundreds, yes, thousands of them.

The little belfry of the Church of the Dominicans was ringing for the early mass, and Niña Chole turned on her way to enter, accompanied by her servants. At the door she threw me back a smile. But what struck me most was this evidence of her piety.



My lodgings in Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz were in an old hostelry dating from the happy days of the viceroys. I expected to stay only a few hours, for I wanted to organise a convoy that very day to start for the regions of my old family estates. In those times one could venture on the Mexican roadways only with an escort of gunmen, for there were

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bands of brigands as famous for their reckless bravery as for the wealth of their trappings. Those were the days of Adriano Cuéllar and Juan de Guzmán.

Suddenly in the sunlit *patio* I saw Niña Chole with her band of servants. With quiet dignity she was giving orders to her head horseman who listened with his eyes cast down and answered in the tongue of Yucatan, the old language that has the sweetness of Italian and the picturesque ingenuousness of a primitive speech. She made a slight bow on seeing me and sent her three Indian maids to fetch me. Each spoke in turn like novices who have learned a litany and recite it by heart. They never raised their eyes as they spoke.

"Niña has sent us, señor—"

"Has sent us to say—"

"Your pardon, señor, to ask you—"

"She has learned, señor, that you are making up a convoy and she also desires to set out."

"A long journey, señor—"

"Many leagues, señor."

"More than two days' journey, señor."

I followed the maids and Niña Chole received me with a gesture of the hands: "Oh, pardon the intrusion."

Her voice was soft and melodious, the voice of a priestess, a princess. After gazing my full at her I bowed humbly. Old art of love learnt in the pages of Ovid! Niña Chole continued: "I have just heard that you are making up an escort for the road. If we are going the same way we might unite our forces. I am going to Necoxtla."

With a courtly bow and a sigh, I answered: "Necoxtla is surely on my route."

Niña Chole then showed some curiosity.

"Are you going very far? To Nueva Siguenza perhaps?"

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"I am going to the plains of Tixul, but I don't know where they are. The land inherited by my family from the days of the viceroys is over there, between Grijalba and Tlacoalpan."

Niña Chole looked at me in surprise.

"What are you saying, señor? Our routes are quite different. Grijalba is on the coast, and it would have been better for you to have remained on the frigate."

I bowed again compliantly.

"Necoxtla is on my route."

She smiled haughtily.

"But we cannot join escorts."

"Why not?"

"Because we shouldn't do so."

Like an offended queen she crossed the little *patio* followed by her maids; under the awnings the light seemed golden as from sails at sea. The mosquitoes buzzed around a jet of water shooting from a silver spout and raining iridescent drops in an alabaster basin. In this hot atmosphere under the stirring umbrella of the palm-tree, the fresh music of the fountain brought back again vivid memories of desert heat and the delights of hours of siesta in the oases. Now and then a rider would come into the *patio*; the hired forces that were to escort us across the sands of the burning land were beginning to gather. Soon they were formed into two bands, both composed of warlike, silent men, old highwaymen, tired of their adventuring, dissatisfied with uncertain gains, who chose to serve the highest bidder, undaunted at any undertaking. Their loyalty was a tradition. I was mounted on my horse, with the pistols in my saddle, behind me the large Morisco saddle-bags holding the provisions for the journey, when Niña Chole reappeared in the *patio*. Seeing me, she

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approached with a smile, though pretending to be offended she tapped her foot on the ground.

“Señor, I beg of you; continue on your journey, and let me follow mine!”

“Your way is my way. I intend to join you just as soon as we have left the city behind.”

Niña Chole’s eyes, clouded before, now revealed a charming clearness. “Tell me, are all Spaniards mad?”

I answered haughtily: “Spaniards are divided into two classes: one is the Marquis de Bradomín, and the other comprises all the rest.”

Niña Chole smiled at me: “What a boaster you are, señor!”

At that moment the head horseman arrived to announce that the escort was saddled and ready to start at her order. Hearing this, Niña Chole gave me a long silent look. Then she turned and asked the servant: “What horse have they given me?”

“The sorrel, niña. There he is.”

“The dappled one?”

“That is he, niña, the one with the white muzzle drinking the water. Look at his fine lines. He has a step that covers the roads and a mouth like silk. He can carry on his saddle a bowl of water and never spill a drop on a gallop.”

“Where is our first stop?”

“At the Convent of San Juan de Tegusco.”

“We shall get there by night?”

“At moonrise.”

“Then tell them to mount at once and start.”

The horseman obeyed. Niña Chole, it seemed to me, could hardly repress a smile: “Señor, it is really wrong of you to follow me; I am starting this moment.”

“So am I.”

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"But is your troop ready?"

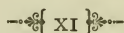
"Ready as I am."

"I am on my way to rejoin my husband and I do not wish to trifle with him. Ask and they will tell you who General Diego Bermudez is."

I smiled carelessly upon hearing this. Her horseman returned and took his place a few steps off, waiting in servile silence. Niña Chole summoned him: "Come, fasten on my spur."

He was obeying her when I took the little silver spur from his hands and bent on one knee before Niña Chole, who with a smile lifted her pretty foot in its silken slipper. My hands trembled as I fastened the spur. My noble friend Barbey D'Aurevilly would have declared that her foot was worthy of the sandal of Pharos. I said nothing, but I kissed it so passionately that Niña Chole laughed lightly: "Señor, not so fast at the beginning."

And she let fall the skirt she had slightly raised.



Our troop crossed the city in a body; once outside the gate we stopped to count the party, then our long wearisome journey began. Here and there between high stockades of cactus appeared Indian huts that greeted us, from the depths of the valleys and the sandy sides of the hills, with high thatches of half-decayed *cañamo*. Copper-hued women came to the doorways and watched us in indifferent silence as we passed. Their attitudes showed the ancient inherited melancholy of their fallen race. Their faces were humble, with teeth of a striking whiteness and the large dark eyes of woodland creatures, indolent and stealthy. They seemed to have been born

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to pass their whole lives in wandering tribes and take their rest at the foot of palm-trees and *ahuehuetles*.

At sundown we caught sight of an Indian village; in the distance it seemed bathed in azure light and peaceful silence. Dusty, scattered flocks wound their way along the road of red earth between high maize-fields. The belfry of the church, with an enormous buzzard's nest, towered above the palm-leaf thatches. This silent old town drowsing in its valley at the edge of the desert brought back memories of the ancient settlements abandoned at the invasion of the Spanish adventurers. All the doors were shut and a light, white smoke, like a patriarchal salutation, streamed up through the evening calm.

We drew up at a doorway and asked hospitality at an old priory of Comendadoras of Santiago. At the knock of our runner, a head in a white coif appeared at the lattice and there was a long conference. We who were far behind let our horses walk slowly, and with loosened reins continued our polite conversation. By the time we reached the door the sister had left the lattice and a few minutes later the heavy cedar doors swung open. A lay-sister, clothed entirely in white, came to the threshold and murmured without raising her eyes: "You may enter, brothers, if you wish to rest in this religious house."

Never were the Comendadoras of Santiago known to have refused their hospitality. To all who asked, it was their rule to grant it; so read the constitutions of the bright and noble Order founded for this pious work by Doña Beatriz de Zayas, the beloved wife of one of the viceroys. The armorial bearings of the founder still adorned the keystone of the door. The lay-sister escorted us across a cloister, shadowy under its orange-trees. It was the cemetery of the Comendadoras and our steps resounded on the tombstones with

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their worn epitaphs. There was a fountain with a sad, monotonous trickle. Night was falling and the fireflies were playing among the dark foliage of the orange-trees. We drew up before a leather door bound with brass. The lay-sister opened it with a great rattle of the keys at her girdle as it swung ajar. She crossed her hands over her white scapular and drew back against the wall for us to pass, while she murmured softly: "This is the hospice, my brothers."

The hospice was a dwelling of agreeable appearance with windows of heavily worked iron looking out on the garden. On one of the walls hung the Founder's portrait, with a long inscription under it, and opposite stood an altar with fresh hangings of linen. The half-light barely showed the Stations of the Cross ranged around the walls. Niña Chole went up to the altar and, covering her head with her shawl, fell on her knees. Her servants at the doorway of the hospice imitated her action, crossing themselves with a pious murmur. Niña Chole raised her voice to offer her thanks for our safe journey and her servants answered in unison. I, as a Knight of Santiago, recited my prayers without kneeling, owing to the dispensation we held from the Canons of Saint Augustine. The lay-sister came to ask me what road I was taking and what was my name. In a voice softened to the same tones as her own, I replied: "I am the Marquis de Bradomín, sister, and my route leads me to this religious house."

The sister eyed me curiously, and replied: "Should you desire to see the Mother Abbess, I shall bring her answer. Only we must be patient, as the Mother Abbess is at present in conference with Monsignor the Bishop of Colima who recently arrived."

"I shall wait, sister, until the Mother Abbess can conveniently receive me."

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“Does the señor know her already?”

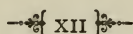
“No, sister. But I come to this holy house in pursuance of a vow.”

At that moment Niña Chole approached. and the sister, looking at her pleasantly, asked: “This is the Marquise also?”

Niña Chole exchanged a roguish glance with me that seemed to promise a happy augury. We both replied: “The Marquise, sister, the Marquise.”

“I shall advise the Mother Abbess immediately. It greatly contents her to know that people of birth arrive here; she also is very Spanish.”

The lay-sister bowed deeply and retired with a soft rustle of her habit and sandals. After her left the servants and Niña Chole stayed with me. I kissed her hand as she remarked with a smile of strange cruelty: “Heaven grant that we meet nobody here who knows me! It will mean death if the news of this trick reaches General Diego Bermudez!”



Two lay-sisters entered carrying a large tray of refreshments and sweetmeats; they were followed by the Mother Abbess in a flowing white habit showing the red cross of Santiago. She paused at the door and, with a slight smile, amiable as well as dignified, saluted us in Latin: “Deo gratias!”

We replied in Spanish: “Blessed be God!”

The Mother Abbess was a handsome specimen of an old noblewoman; she was pale and pink-cheeked, graceful and courtly. Her words of welcome were cordial: “I also am a Spaniard, having been born in Viana del Prior. When I was a child I knew a very old gentleman who was called the Marquis de Bradomín. He was a true saint.”

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I replied without boasting: "Besides being a saint, he was my grandfather."

The Mother Abbess smiled at this and sighed: "Has he been dead many years?"

"Many years."

"God help him in His place of glory! I can remember him very well. He had been all over the world and visited here, I believe, in Mexico."

"He took part in the war after the rising of Father Hidalgo."

"That is true! That is true! Young as I was, I remember he used to speak of it. He was a great friend of my house. I belong to the family of the Andrades de Cela."

"The Andrades de Cela! An ancient line!"

"It became extinct at the death of my father. What misfortunes have overtaken our ancient houses and what ungrateful times we live in! Everywhere the enemies of religion and tradition prevail, here as well as in Spain!"

The Mother Abbess raised her eyes to heaven in a sigh; then she turned to Niña Chole with the kindly smile of a royal princess who has retired to the contemplative life.

"No doubt the Marquise is Mexican?"

Niña Chole blushed slightly as she lowered her eyes: "Yes, Mother Abbess."

"But of Spanish blood?"

"Yes, Mother Abbess."

As Niña Chole seemed to hesitate in her answers, and her cheeks were glowing like roses, I intervened to help her. In her honour I gallantly invented a complete romantic love story, such as were written in those times. The Mother Abbess was so moved during my story that I could see two large tears hovering on her lashes. From time to time I glanced

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at Niña Chole but could never catch her eye. She listened motionless in her anxiety. I marvelled myself at the flow of my speech in constructing my old comedy. I must have been really inspired, for suddenly Niña Chole buried her face in her hands and sobbed loudly. The Mother Abbess, deeply moved, hurried to fan her face with the holy scapular of the order, and I held her hands forcibly in my own until she became somewhat more tranquil. The Mother Abbess then led us into the garden so that the air might calm the Marquise. She soon left us alone, as she was called to assist at the recitation of matins in the choir.

The garden was fortified with walls like a citadel. It was vast and shadowy and filled with murmurs and perfumes. The trees were so heavy that only through the open garden could we see the light of the moon silvering their upper branches. We walked in silence, the Marquise sighing and I pensive, not knowing how to console her. Between the trees we caught sight of an opening of clipped myrtles bordered by white and winding paths; under the light of the moon the place seemed touched with magic. The Marquise paused; two lay-sisters were seated beside the fountain protected from the moonlight by a ring of dwarfed laurel trees. I don't know whether they were praying together or whispering the secrets of the convent, for the sounds of their voices were muffled in the rippling of the water. Their jars were being filled and they rose to greet us:

“Ave Maria Purissima!”

“Conceived without sin!”

When I tried to drink at the fountain they raised a loud cry: “Señor! What are you doing? Señor!”

I paused in astonishment: “Is the water poisonous?”

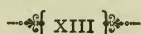
“Cross yourself with it, señor, it is holy water; only the

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Community has dispensation to drink it, by a bull of the Holy Father sent from Rome. It is the Holy Water of the Infant Jesus!"

And both speaking at once, the lay-sisters pointed out the lovely little image playing in its nakedness, as it turned the waters into an alabaster basin. They told me it was the Infant Jesus, and upon hearing them the Marquise crossed herself devoutly. I assured the sisters that I also had a dispensation to drink the waters of the Infant Jesus. They showed me great deference at this and each one desired to offer me her jar, but I preferred to satisfy my thirst by applying my lips at the holy spout from which the water was flowing. I had such a desire to laugh that I was almost smothered. Niña Chole, incredulous of my story of the dispensation, whispered in my ear: "God punishes the sacrilegious."

The force and sincerity in her tone made me think that Niña Chole, like Lucrezia Borgia, might be the daughter of some pope.



A sister came to seek us after the matins.

"Will you kindly come to the refectory? Supper is ready."

Her hands were joined as she spoke; she was old and servile. We followed her to the threshold, where Niña Chole held back.

"Sister, this is a day of fasting for me and I cannot enter the refectory for supper."

At the same time she turned her eyes to implore my assistance, which I lent her gladly. I realised that Niña Chole was afraid some of the travellers might recognise her, as every one in the convent gathered for supper at the sound of

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the bell. The sister, edified, asked solicitously: "What would her ladyship desire?"

"To retire to rest, sister."

"Whenever my lady pleases. No doubt she has made a long journey?"

"From Vera Cruz."

"Then her poor ladyship must be very tired."

With such speeches, she led us down a long corridor lighted by the white moonlight from the windows. In the holy silence my spurs resounded with martial and almost sacrilegious clearness, and as if in fear the sister and the Marquise moved before me in a hushed, devout manner. The sister opened an old traceried door and stood aside, saying: "Enter, my señora; I shall not stay; I must take the Señor Marquis to the refectory; then I shall return to serve you promptly."

The Marquise entered without looking at me. The sister closed the door and went before like a shadow, guiding me with a vague gesture. She left me in the refectory and went off after a salute more servile than before. I looked around and when my eyes had discovered a seat at the long table the chaplain of the convent rose and came to say courteously that my place was at the head of the table. The chaplain was a Dominican friar, a humanist and a poet who had lived many years in exile from Mexico, deprived by the Archbishop of his license to hear confessions or say mass. All on account of a false delation. He told me the story while he served me. At the end he said: "Now the Señor Marquis de Bradomín knows the Life and Miracles of Fray Lope Castellar. If he desires a chaplain for his house, believe me I shall leave these holy ladies here with the greatest pleasure. Even if it means going across the sea, my Señor Marquis."

"I already have my chaplains in Spain."

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"Pardon me then, but I might serve you here in Mexico, a sinful hole where they are so liable to send a Christian to eternity without time for an amen. Believe me, whoever can afford to pay a chaplain ought to have one, if only to have him at hand for an absolution at the moment of death."

When the collation was served and we all rose to our feet amid the sound of the shuffling seats, they recited the prayer of thanksgiving composed by the pious foundress, Doña Beatriz de Zayas. After the lay-sisters who had waited at the table began to remove the cloths, the Mother Abbess entered with a benevolent smile: "Would the Señor Marquis desire another sleeping chamber?"

The flushed cheeks of the Mother Abbess made me understand, and only half concealing a smile I answered: "I shall share the apartment with the Marquise, who is very nervous, if it is not against the rules of this religious house."

The Mother Abbess interrupted me: "The rules of our holy house lay down nothing against religion."

I had a sudden start. The Mother Abbess lowered her eyes and held them down, as she continued in a doctoral tone: "According to Our Lord Jesus Christ an equal love is merited by His creatures, both those who are joined together in a sacred bond according to His will and those who live apart from the world by His special grace. I am no Pharisee to believe myself better than others, Señor Marquis."

The Mother Abbess in her white habit was certainly a beautiful woman, a great lady capable of understanding both life and love, and I was tempted to pay some court to her. But the old sister who had taken me to the refectory was approaching with a lamp, and the Mother Abbess, having directed her to guide me, took her leave. I confess to a feeling of regret on seeing her white habit disappearing down the

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shadowy corridor. As the lay-sister waited beside me with the lamp, I asked her: "Should I have kissed the hand of the Mother Abbess?"

The sister, arranging the coif on her forehead, answered dryly: "Here we only kiss the hand of the Señor Bishop when he honours us with a visit."

And the soft sliding of her sandals conducted the light that led me to the door of the Marquise.

—*{ XIV }*—

The cell was spacious and perfumed with sweet basil; a window opened on the garden where the dark tops of the cedars made confused shadows in the silvery blue. The ceaseless call of the cricket was all that broke the silence. I barred and locked the door and noiselessly drew aside the white netting that enclosed the single couch concealed within. Niña Chole was sleeping, calmly happy with a prayer still lingering on her lips. I bent over to kiss them; it was the first time. Niña Chole awoke with a smothered cry: "What are you doing here, señor?"

In a gallant and protecting tone I answered: "I would guard your slumbers, my queen, my lady."

Niña Chole could not understand how I came to be in her cell, till I recalled to her the discussion of our conjugal rights with the Mother Abbess. She grew very angry as she listened to me, and closing her eyes she murmured repeatedly: "Oh, what a terrible vengeance General Diego Bermudez will take!"

And furious at seeing me smile, she struck at my face with her hands, which were small and brown and covered with rings; but I held them fast. Fixing my eyes on her, I

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squeezed the struggling hands till she groaned, then overcoming my impatience I pressed kisses on them. Sobbing she fell back on the pillow, and without any wish to console her I drew away, a fierce disdain in my heart, smiling to hide the trembling of my lips. For a long time I remained leaning at the window and gazing into the murmurous garden. The cricket kept up his distant, primitive note. Now and then I could hear Niña Chole sighing wearily and my always compassionate heart felt touched for her. Suddenly across the midnight silence came the tolling of the convent bell. Niña Chole called to me in fear: "Señor, do you not recognise the tolling for one in the last agony?"

At the same time she crossed herself devoutly. Without a word I went over to her bed and stood looking at her sadly. In a frightened voice, she added: "One of the sisters is at the point of death!"

Taking her hands in mine I whispered amorously: "Is that what frightens you?"

"Oh! Who can it be? Her soul is now on its way to Our Saviour. Can it be one of the novices?"

With a diabolical smile I suggested: "Perhaps it is myself!"

"How, señor?"

"Perhaps General Diego Bermudez is at the convent gates."

"No! No!"

And squeezing my hands she began to weep. I wished to dry her tears with my lips, but she turned away her head on the pillow, begging: "Please don't. Please don't."

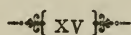
Her voice melted away in weariness. I gazed long at her trembling lashes and the half-opened rosebud of her mouth. Ceaselessly the bell tolled out its sorrowful dirge. The branches stirred softly through the garden, and the breeze, waving the white bed-hangings, brought gusts of perfume.

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The bell ceased for a moment and I thought the time was ripe to kiss Niña Chole again. She seemed to yield, when suddenly the silence was broken by the double stroke for death. Niña Chole gave a cry and pressed against my breast.

“Let us pray!”

With our heads together on the pillow we said a prayer for the poor unknown sister who had passed away. Niña Chole trembled and took refuge within my arms.



The birds were beginning to salute the sun from the garden trees when we, already dressed for our journey, rested a moment at the window. Niña Chole leaned her head on my shoulder and, sighing softly, turned her hypnotic eyes upon me and gave me the lovely gaze of a priestess. Then I said: “Are you sad, Niña?”

“I am sad only because we must now part. The slightest suspicion may cost us our lives.”

I ran my fingers amorously through her hair and answered boastfully: “Do not be afraid; I shall know how to silence your servants.”

“They are Indians, señor. Here they might promise on their knees, but once under the eyes of their fierce master they would tell everything. We must say farewell here!”

I kissed her hands passionately: “Niña, do not say this. Let us go back to Vera Cruz. Perhaps we shall find the ‘Dalila’ still in the harbour; we can embark for Grijalba and hide ourselves at my hacienda in Tixul.”

Niña Chole gazed on me with a long indefinable look of love. Her queenly Indian eyes were languorously brilliant; they seemed at once to consent and to refuse. She drew her

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shawl across her breast and whispered: "My history is a very sad one!"

To leave no doubt of it two tears rose in her eyes. I thought I could divine it and said generously: "Do not try to tell me; sad stories only recall to me my own."

She sighed: "There is something in my life that cannot be pardoned."

"Men like me can pardon anything."

Hearing this, she hid her face in her hands, and at that instant I knew her sin. It was the great crime of the classic tragedies. Niña Chole was accursed like Mirra and Salome. I leaned over her in pity, and finding her face wet with tears I kissed her lips in a gesture of noble pardon. Then in a low voice I whispered: "I know all. General Diego Bermudez is your father."

She groaned wildly: "Would to God it were not so! When I came out to him I was twelve years old and hardly remembered him."

"Remember him no longer."

Niña Chole, moved with gratitude and love, hid her head in my breast and moaned: "You are very generous!"

My lips trembled against her little ear, which was as fresh and delicate as a pearly shell.

"Niña, let us turn back to Vera Cruz."

"No."

"Are you afraid I shall abandon you? Do you not see that I am your slave for life?"

"For life! Both our lives would be short indeed!"

"Why?"

"Because he would kill us. He has sworn it!"

"Perhaps he might not be able to fulfil his oath."

"He would fulfil it."

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In her sobs she wound her arms around my neck. Her eyes, wet with tears, were fixed upon mine as if to read them. I, pretending to be blinded by her gaze, closed my eyes, and she sighed: "Would you take me with you without knowing all my story?"

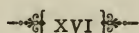
"I know it already."

"You do not know everything about me."

"You can tell the rest when we have ceased to love, if that day ever comes."

"All, you must know all, even if I receive your scorn! You are the only man I have ever loved, I swear it, the only one. But to escape from my father I had a lover who died assassinated."

She began to sob. Trembling with passion, I kissed her eyes, I kissed her lips. Ruddy lips! Eyes dark and beautiful as her story!



The convent bells were ringing for mass and Niña Chole desired to attend before starting on her journey. It was a long mass of requiem. Fray Lope Castellar was the officiant, and I, in penance for my sins, the server. The Comendadoras chanted the Penitential Psalms, and their white and noble figures, with the trains of their choir habits, came and went around the lectern with its open, red-lettered missal. On a black pall surrounded by candles in the body of the church lay the corpse of a nun. Her hands were crossed and among her stiffened fingers a rosary was entwined. A white bandage bound up her chin and held her mouth in position; her gathered lips showed that she was toothless; her lids were still half-open, stiffened and dark; her flat brows seemed to stretch far up under the coif. She was shrouded in her habit,

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and its hem fell over her bare feet, which were yellow as wax.

When the responses were finished and as Fray Lope Castellar turned for the benediction of the faithful, a party of the troops of my escort who had lingered at the door during mass rushed in. Like hawks they swept into the chancel to capture a young man kneeling there, who turned about bravely, as he felt their hands on his shoulders, and gave them a tremendous resistance until, overcome by numbers, he fell against the steps. The nuns cried out and fled from the choir. Fray Lope Castellar approached holding the chalice to his breast: "What are you doing, O evil generation!"

The youth panting on the floor cried: "Fray Lope! You do not betray your friend in this way!"

. "Nor suspect him either, Guzmán!"

Then the young man sprang like a wounded stag escaping from the hounds that assail it; he struggled to his feet, darted through the crowd that was attacking him, freed his arms and ran down the church. On reaching the door and finding it locked, he turned fearlessly and, snatching down the chain that served to ring the bells, used it in defence. In admiration of such strength and bravery I drew my pistols and placed myself at his side: "Halt there!"

The men of the escort stood irresolute, and at that moment Fray Lope, who remained in the chancel, opened the door of the sacristy with a great noise. The youth, making a wide swing with the chain, sprang over the dead body of the nun, knocked down the row of candles and gained the door. It closed with a bang before the others, shouting, could reach it; so in their defeated rage they turned on me. With my back against the grille of the choir I awaited their approach and then discharged my two pistols. The crowd suddenly

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grew silent and two men fell to the floor. Niña Chole, tragically beautiful, cried out: "Calm yourselves! Calm yourselves!"

The hired troops did not hear her. Their anger now thoroughly roused, they drew their pistols and a rain of bullets fell upon the grille. I, miraculously unwounded, put my hand on my machete: "Back! Back, you scoundrels!"

Niña Chole again interfered, crying loudly: "Spare his life and I will pay you well for it!"

An old man who seemed to be acting as captain turned his fierce eyes towards her. His ragged beard was trembling with rage: "Niña, there is a heavy price on Juan Guzmán's head."

"I know it."

"If we had taken him alive we should have had a hundred doubloons."

"You shall have them."

A storm of angry voices arose. The old man raised his arms to impose silence: "Let the people speak!"

And with his beard still trembling he turned to us: "Do not our comrades who have been shot down like dogs amount to anything?"

Niña Chole answered ardently: "Yes. What would you ask?"

"This must be settled quickly."

"That is well."

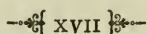
"We must have another security than words."

Niña Chole tore off her rings, the rings that gave her hand the sacred character of a princess, and haughtily threw them on the pavement: "Divide them and leave us!"

After some murmurs of indecision the men slowly disappeared down the nave. We stopped in the chancel to reconsider affairs. Niña Chole drew her arms around my shoulders

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and, gazing into my eyes, murmured: "Oh! What a wild Spaniard! What a lion of bravery!"



Fray Lope Castellar was reading his breviary as he waited for us in the sacristy. In a carved wardrobe the sacred vestments were ranged in careful order. The sacristy was a sad place, lighted from a high, barred window through the shadows of cedar branches outside. The odour of wax and incense seemed to evaporate with the light. Fray Lope rose from his bench on seeing us enter: "I feared they had killed you! It is a miracle! Please be seated; the lady must need repose. I shall let you taste the wine His Lordship uses at mass when he deigns to visit us. It is a Spanish wine and famous, very famous."

As he spoke he opened a large cupboard and from its depths brought forth a gummy jar which he handled with evident affection: "You shall see what nectar it is. Humble friar that I am, I say my mass with a cruder wine. Both are the blood of Our Saviour Jesus Christ!"

His hand shook as he filled the little silver cup and passed it to Niña Chole who took it in silence and then passed it to me. Fray Lope meanwhile was pouring out another cup: "No, no, my señora. Let the noble Marquis take this."

Niña Chole replied languidly: "You may drink with him, Fray Lope."

Fray Lope laughed sonorously: "What would His Lordship say!"

He sat down on a chest and put the cup beside him: "Will the noble Marquis permit me to ask him a question? How does he know Juan de Guzmán?"

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"I don't know him."

"Then why defend him so bravely?"

"It was my mood at the moment."

Fray Lope shook his tonsured head and sipped at the cup in his hand. "A mood! A mood! Juan de Guzmán is my friend, yet I would have hesitated to dare so much."

Niña Chole replied in a haughty tone: "All men are not equals."

Softened by the good wine the friar had poured for me, I was able to be more courteous.

"It takes more bravery to celebrate the mass, Fray Lope."

Fray Lope looked at me with a humorous glance.

"That is not called bravery; that is grace."

We raised our cups as we spoke and finished them together. Fray Lope started to refill them.

"And the noble Marquis is still ignorant who Juan de Guzmán is?"

"Yesterday as my escort was assembling I heard his name for the first time. I believe he is a famous leader of bandits."

"Famous! There is a price on his head."

"Will he be able to get away?"

Fray Lope clasped his hands and raised his eyes solemnly.

"Who knows, señor!"

"And why did he dare to enter the church?"

"He is very religious. Besides, the Mother Abbess is his protectress."

At that moment the lid of the chest was shoved up and the head of a man appeared. It was Juan de Guzmán. Fray Lope hurried to the door and drew the bolts. Juan de Guzmán sprang into the middle of the sacristy, his eyes dewy and brilliant, and tried to kiss my hands. I took him in my arms. Fray Lope came beside us and in a trembling, angry

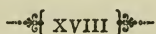
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voice muttered: "Those who love danger shall perish in it!"

Juan de Guzmán smiled scornfully: "Death is appointed for every man, Fray Lope!"

"Lower your voice a bit."

We followed his wise counsel and continued our talk at one end of the sacristy, while Niña Chole, in frightened prayer, knelt at the other.



There was a price on the head of Juan de Guzmán, the splendid head of a Spanish adventurer. In the sixteenth century he would have won his royal letters of nobility fighting under the colours of Hernán Cortés, and left us a beautiful memory, this splendid captain of bandits with the bearing of a cavalier, for he had been born to glorify his name in the Indies, ravaging cities, violating princesses and putting emperors in chains. Old and weary, covered with wounds and glories, he would have returned to his native land, bearing the golden bars of spoils won perhaps at Otumba or Mangoré. Battles of glorious ringing names! He would have built his castle, established his inheritance with the king's approval, and died, to be laid away in a noble tomb in some monastery church. His escutcheon and lengthy epitaph in stone would have recorded his mighty deeds; and years and years later his sepulchral form, stretched in its burial chapel, would have been used by mothers to frighten their children into silence!

I confess my admiration for that noble Abbess who had known how to be his protectress without ceasing to be a saint. If I were she, assuredly I should have been tempted by the devil, for the captain of the highwaymen had all the domi-

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nating, gallant air that characterised the old portraits of the captains of the Renaissance; he was as handsome as some bastard son of Cesare Borgia. They said that, like that prince, he killed in cold blood, without frenzy, as men do who are scornful of life, and, perhaps, for that reason do not consider it any great crime to kill. His bloody deeds were deeds that in other times would have flowered into epics. To-day fewer and fewer are the souls that reach these sovereign heights, for our spirits grow constantly less ardent, less impetuous, less mighty. Sad indeed is the picture of these brothers in spirit of the great adventurers of the Americas, finding no other destiny in life than that of a gallant brigandage!

This leader of the brigands had his amorous story too. He was as famous for his gallant bearing as for his fierce bravery. He was the lord of the roads and the taverns; with renowned daring he would show himself alone, prancing on his steed, bearing the brim of his sombrero embroidered in gold. His white zarape floated around him in folds like the Moorish *alquicel*. He was handsome in a fiery, manly way. He had small, sharp eyes, an aquiline nose, dark round cheeks, sweeping moustaches and a soft black beard. His soul flamed in his glance, the glance of the great captains, dashing and direct as the blade of a sword. Few like him, unfortunately, are left to-day!

What a happy ending to the story of Juan de Guzmán if, at the close of life, he could have repented and retired in peace to some cloister of penance after the manner of Saint Francis of Siena.



With no other escort than a few faithful horsemen, we made our way back to Vera Cruz. The "Dalila" was still

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anchored under the fortress of Ulua, as we could see when our weary, thirsty horses had mounted the summit of a hill. Making no stop, we crossed the city and went down to the beach to embark immediately. Shortly afterward the frigate hoisted sail to take advantage of the wind which rippled its way across the green enchanted waters. The canvases had hardly filled out when Niña Chole took to her couch, pale and suffering from seasickness.

The captain, in his straw sombrero and white linens, was pacing the round-house; some sailors were asleep along the starboard deck where the rigging threw a shadow; and two ranchmen, who had come on at San Juan de Tuxtlan, were playing cards under a canvas awning in the stern. They were father and son, both of them lean and jaundiced; the old man bearded like a goat, the youngster yet unshaved. They quarrelled over every play, and the loser threatened to kill the winner. Each counted out his money, grumbling in anger as he put it in his purse. For a while the cards would lie scattered idly on the *zarafe* stretched between the players; then the old man would take them up gingerly and begin to shuffle them again. The young man, always in a bad humour, would take his gold-embroidered purse from his belt and dump its contents on the *zarafe*. Then the game went on as before.

I approached and stood watching them. The old man who had the pack in his hands at that moment courteously invited me to sit down, bidding the youngster to make room for me in the shadow. To hear was to accept, and I took a seat between the two ranchmen, counted out ten doubloons and put them on the first card that was turned up. I won and so continued to play, although from the first I regarded the old man as a crafty cardsharper. His dried-up hands, like the

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claws of a kite, shuffled the cards deftly. The youngster kept a gloomy silence watching the play of his father and playing always the same cards that I played. As the old man showed no impatience in losing, I began to suspect his plan to rob me and grew cautious. Nevertheless, I went on winning.

As the sun went down, some of the other passengers gathered under the awning. The old ranchman improved his play and began to gain. Among the gamblers was the taciturn, handsome youth who had previously disputed with me for the smiles of Niña Chole. Our eyes had hardly met when I began to lose. It may have been superstition, but the fact is that I felt a presentiment. The youth went on winning; he appeared, as I remember, mysterious and strange; he was a giant with blue eyes and fair hair, red cheeks and a remarkably white forehead. He dressed his hair like the ancient Nazarenes and raised his eyes in a rapturous, ecstatic manner. Suddenly he stretched out his arms and stopped the old ranchman who had shuffled the pack and was starting to draw. He paused for an instant, and then softly and slowly said: "I match you for everything. Play!"

The son, without dropping his glance on his father, cried out: "Father, match him!"

"I heard him, you scoundrel. Start counting out the money."

He shuffled the pack and started to draw; every eye was fixed on the ranchman's hand. He drew slowly with a touch that seemed to delight in the painful pleasure and wished to prolong it. Quickly came a cry: "The jack! The jack!"

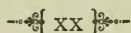
It was the card of the handsome young man. The ranchman drew himself together, flinging down the pack in disgust: "Son, pay the money."

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And throwing the *zarape* over his shoulders, he strode away. The crowd scattered murmuring: "He won seven hundred doubloons!"

"No, a thousand!"

Intuitively I turned my head and my eyes fell upon Niña Chole. She was reclining on the gunwale; the sails, as the wind died down, had left an opening through which she was smiling on the beautiful, fair-haired youth. I was filled with such a flood of jealousy and rage that I felt myself turning white. If I had possessed in my eyes the power of the basilisk, I would have turned them both to dust. I did not possess it, so Niña Chole could continue to profane her smile of ancient royalty.



When they had lighted the lamps on board I still remained on the bridge, and Niña Chole, purring and insinuating as a cat, came and took my arm. Without showing jealousy, I maintained so much dignity that she drew away and regarded me with a timid reproach; then rising on the tips of her toes, she kissed me quickly: "Are you sad?"

"No."

"Then you are put out with me?"

"No."

"Perhaps—"

We were alone together on the bridge, so Niña Chole hung around my shoulders, breathing heavily: "You don't love me any more! Now what will become of me! I shall die! I shall kill myself!"

Her lovely eyes, full of tears, turned across the moonlit path of the sea. I kept silent, for I was profoundly moved. Then just as I was yielding to the desire to console her, the

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silent, fair-haired young man again appeared on the deck. Niña Chole, slightly disturbed, dried her tears. I believe I frightened her with the expression of my eyes, for her hands trembled. After a moment she whispered passionately and contritely in my ear: "Grant me pardon!"

I answered vaguely: "You ask my pardon?"

"Yes."

"I have nothing to pardon."

She smiled through the tears that remained in her eyes: "Why do you deny it? You are angry with me because I have looked at that—. As you do not know him, I understand your jealousy."

I remained silent, and over her mute, cruel mouth there came a smile that was strange and perverse. The fair-haired youth was whispering to a mulatto cabin-boy. They went off and reclined together in the stern. I asked in a violent rage: "Who is he?"

"A Russian prince."

"Is he in love with you?"

"No."

"You have smiled at him twice."

Niña Chole cried with roguish joy: "Not twice but three or four times. But it is your smile, not mine, that would win him. Look at him now!"

The handsome blond young giant was carrying on his conversation with the mulatto boy, his arm around the latter's waist. The mulatto was laughing gaily; he was one of those cabin-boys who congregate for a long trans-Atlantic voyage in the south. He was half-naked, with the dark terra-cotta colouring that is so beautiful. Niña Chole turned her eyes away in scorn: "Doesn't that convince you how foolish your jealousy is?"

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Freed from my cruel uncertainty, I smiled: "Then it is you who might be jealous."

Niña Chole looked proudly and happily into my eyes: "Not at all; you are a man."

"Niña, you forget that it is possible to sacrifice both to Hebe and to Ganymede."

"I don't understand what you mean."

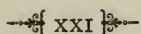
"Perhaps it is better that you don't."

My head suddenly fell in sad meditation on my breast. I wished to see no more and pondered deeply on my great love for the classics, which is equal to my love of women. That is the education we received in the Seminary of Nobles. In reading the amiable Petronius I have more than once lamented over the centuries that have made a secret sin of the divine voluptuous festivals. Only in sacred mystery do the choice spirits stir to-day who would renew the ancient times of the Greeks and Romans, when youths crowned with roses sacrificed at the altars of Aphrodite. Happy, abhorred shadows, you call me and I cannot follow!

That beautiful sin, the reward of gods and temptation of poets, is for me forbidden fruit. Heaven, always perverse, has ordained that only the roses of Venus should blossom in my breast, and the older I grow the more disconsolate I am over this. I realise that it would be pleasant, as life declines, to be able to enter the garden of perverse loves. For me, unhappily, there is no hope of this. The breath of Satan has passed over my soul, inflaming me to every sin; likewise through my soul the breath of the Archangel has inspired me to every virtue. I have suffered every sorrow, I have tasted every joy; I have quenched my thirst at all the fountains, and have lain down to rest at every roadside. Once I loved the Muses and their voices were familiar to me. Two things

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alone have ever remained sealed from me: the love of youths and the music of that German called Wagner.



We remained on deck all night. The frigate tacked to catch the wind which seemed to elude us far off on the phosphorescent sea. The coast-line appeared like smoke over the larboard rail, at times low and flat, at other times sloping off into hills. Thus we voyaged along for some time. The stars slowly paled out and the blue of heaven melted into white. Two sailors in the mizzen-top sang as they reefed the sail. The boatswain's whistle sounded; the frigate luffed about; and the canvas shook out loosely. We were steering for the coast. Shortly after the pennants stood out gaily from the masts, and as the sun arose we caught sight of Grijalba.

At that hour the warmth was delicious, and the fresh breeze had an odour of tar and seaweed. There seemed to be voluptuous stirrings in the air. The horizon laughed under the splendid sun. Gusts from the virgin forests, timid and caressing like the breath of women in love, stirred through the rigging and penetrated and softened the soul with their perfume as they came across the drowsy waters. One could fancy that the stretch of the Gulf of Mexico was conscious throughout its green depths of the languor of that dawn laden with the pollen of mystery, as though it were the seraglio of the universe. From under the jib I studied the city at my ease with the aid of a spy-glass. Seen from the sea, Grijalba recalls the unreal houses and landscapes drawn by precocious children; it is white, blue and scarlet, all the colours of the rainbow. It smiles at you like a creole maid clad in spring-time hues, bathing her little feet in the waters of the harbour.

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The result is strange, with its roof-gardens of brilliant tiles and its clear distances where the palm-trees throw gallant shadows that speak of remote deserts and the weary caravans that rest in their shade.

Groves of giant trees surrounded the cove and between their branches waved the plumes of the royal palms. A silent river with water white as milk cut a deep pathway through the grove and lingered playfully among the islands of the shore. The white waters, reflecting the sun, carried down a fallen tree among whose floating branches were to be seen birds of a fantastic, legendary plumage. Then an Indian came down guiding his canoe from the prow. The lattices stirred with the breeze and under the rising sun the world of emerald green seemed full of graceful laughter, like the divine old seas of the Sirens and Tritons.

How beautiful even to-day are the memories that come back to me of these distant tropic climes! He who has once seen them can never forget them. The blue calm of the sea and sky; the burning, blinding sun; the air full of the aromas of the tropics, leave, like some very beloved sweet-hearts, in the senses, the soul and the flesh, memories so voluptuous that only in extreme age does the desire to relive them die away. My mind grows younger to-day as I recall the immense breadth of the silvery Gulf of Mexico, whither I have never returned. My thoughts record the towers of Vera Cruz, the woods of Campeche, the sands of Yucatan, the palaces of Palenque, the palm trees of Tuxtlan and Laguna. And always, always, amid these memories comes that of Niña Chole as I saw her for the first time among her train of servants, resting in the shade of a pyramid, her hair falling free, her robe the white hipil of the ancient Mayan priestesses!

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We had hardly disembarked when we were surrounded by a grimy, miserable crowd begging for alms. Followed by this horde we arrived at the hostelry with its great stone portico in the old conventual style, where a few worn old women had ranged themselves. Here we again encountered the two gambling ranchmen who had come on board the frigate. I discovered them settled within the *patio* near a small door through which a crowd of horsemen, ranchmen and adventurers continually came and went. They were still ready with their cards and their quarrels. They recognised me from a distance and rose to salute me with great courtesy. Then the elder, handing the cards to his son, came over with a deep salaam: "We are here at your service, señor. Our good will is at your disposal; merely ask us, señor."

And after having embraced me warmly, raising me from the ground in the Mexican style of showing love and respect, the old ranchman went on: "If you wish to try your luck you know where to find us. We are going to stay here. When will the Señor Marquis set out on his journey?"

"To-morrow at daybreak, if I cannot get away to-night."

The old man shrewdly caressed his beard.

"Well, we shall see you before you start. We shall learn if there is any truth in the saying: 'The first play of the traveller is quick and sure.'"

I answered with a laugh: "Yes; such profound proverbs must not be left in question."

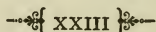
The ranchman gave a solemn bow of consent: "I see that my Señor Marquis intends a compliment. He does well and for this alone deserves to be Archbishop of Mexico."

Again with a roguish smile he waited until two Indian

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riders had passed us; when they could no longer hear us he continued in a mysterious whisper: "There is only this I wish to say to you: we begin by putting up five hundred doubloons and we shall have a thousand left to save us in case we lose. The money of a comrade, señor. Some other time we can discuss it more fully. Look at the impatience of that young scoundrel! A colt without a bridle, señor. He wears me out. We shall see you later."

He went back making signs to calm the youngster. Sitting down, he took the cards and began to shuffle them. Soon there was a crowd of gamblers around him. Horsemen, cowboys and ranchers stopped for a moment as they came and went, and tried their luck on a card. Two riders bent down from their saddles outside the door, reined up their horses and threw down their purses. Some *charros* entered with a rich rattle of spurs, their beaver sombreros with fantastic martial embroideries of silver crushed down over their eyes. Then came Indians softly moving like phantoms on their humble sandals. Ranchmen arrived, armed like soldiery with pistols at their belt, and the machete swinging from embroidered sashes. Now and again some outcast stole across the sunny patio carrying his fighting cock under his arm; a shrewd, perverse figure, with mocking eyes and lank hair, cynical mouth and black, flaccid hands, as ready to rob as to beg. He stole about through the crowd, gathered his miserable alms, and went off muttering some filthiness or other.



Niña Chole arose early and opened the windows on the balcony. The sunlight fell across the room in a shower of rays so gay and vivid that it seemed to meet the mirror in

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golden laughter. The canary in his cage felt the thrill and burst into rippling song. Niña Chole herself joined him in a little melody as fresh as the morning. She was clothed only in the silken tunic that seemed like a diaphanous, heavenly mist around her adorable body. She glanced at me under her lashes between outbreaks of laughter and singing, as she kissed the jasmines entwined around the window-bars. She was, indeed, a temptation, with her hair falling over her bare shoulders, her olive skin and laughing lips. She was like a bright, triumphant dawn. Suddenly she turned on me roguishly: "Up, lazy-bones, up!"

And she sprinkled my face with dew she had gathered from the roses on the balcony.

"Up! Up!"

I sprang from the hammock as she, seeing I had risen, ran from the room scattering her songs like a canary hopping in his cage, changing from one ripple to another in sweet bewilderment and infantile delight, for the day was cloudless and the sun was so merry in the enchanted pool of the mirror. Down below the balconies the horsemen could be heard getting our mounts ready. The loose curtains waved in the morning air and the jasmine, scattering perfume, shook its tasselled head through the grates. Niña Chole then returned. Through the reflection in my mirror I caught sight of her creeping on the tips of her high-heeled slippers, smiling mischievously as she whispered mirthfully in my ear: "Coxcomb! For whom are you making yourself so fine?"

"For you, Niña!"

"Truly?"

She closed her eyes and ran her fingers through my hair to muss it; then she laughed gaily and held out a golden spur for me to strap it on her queenly foot which I could not keep

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from kissing. We went out into the patio where the Indian was waiting with our horses bridled; we mounted and set out. The blue summits shone with a golden triumphal light. The breeze came in light eddies, moist and soft as the breath of streams and pastures. There were long sensual streaks of red across the Eastern skies, and the points of the cedars shining in the rising sun seemed altars where the gathered birds were plighting vows with their bills entwined. Niña Chole at once put her horse to a gallop, without pulling up until she was well in the country.

Throughout the day we constantly met with gay bands of creoles and mulattoes; they journeyed under clouds of dust, their gallant steeds harnessed in the Mexican style with saddles embroidered in gold and rich saddlecloths emblazoned like the copes of the sanctuary. With a rattle of bridles and spurs and a cracking of whips the cavalcade swung across the country. The sun lit up the bright leather of the harness and glistened on the blades of the machetes hanging from the saddle-trees. The fairs had begun, the famous fairs of Grijalba, which gathered in the city and among the huts outside, across the green meadows and dusty roadsides, spread there by no other chance than convenience and fortune. We drew up our horses which whinnied and shook their manes. Niña Chole smiled at me and stretched out her hand so that we might still be united.



Coming out of a grove of palm-trees we caught sight of a great surging throng of men and beasts of burden. The clatter of cattle-bells sounded over the chaffering and bargaining; the plain seemed to tremble under the martial galloping,

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the heavy cartings, and the sounds of whips and bridles. Once in the plain, we were surrounded by a monstrous crowd of clamouring unfortunates; the blind and the maimed, dwarfs and lepers, hunted us down, tormented us, rolling under the horses' hoofs, dragging themselves along the road, howling and praying, their wounds full of dust, their bones twisted fantastically, withered, stunted and horrible. They closed around us, beating their shoulders, raising their caps and scrambling for the money we threw them as we passed.

With this rascally escort we arrived at the hut of a negro who had been a slave. The hoofs of our company and the clamourings of the beggars brought him to his door as we dismounted; on seeing us, he made his way through the crowd that fell back before his whip, and seized the stirrup of Niña Chole, kissing her hands with such humility that one would have said a princess had arrived. To the negro's cries the whole tribe made reply. The freedman, it seemed, had married an Andalusian maid of Niña Chole; she lifted up her arms as she beheld us: "Virgin of my soul! My *amitos!*"

And she led Niña Chole by the hand into the hut. "May the sun never darken," she said, "that brings you to honour my poverty, my queen, my little nugget of gold."

The negro smiled at us with his glazed animal eyes; they sat us down and remained standing before us. Exchanging glances and speeches, they both made haste to tell us the same story: "A farmer brought in from the country two fine white colts. The loveliest things imaginable! White as doves! What a team for Niña Chole's *volante!*"

Niña Chole could not wait for more: "I must see them! Can you not buy them for me?"

She rose to her feet and, wrapping the shawl closely around her, cried: "Let us go! Let us go!"

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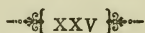
Her old Andalusian servant smiled shrewdly: "As ever, your slightest whim must be satisfied!"

She ceased smiling and added, as though the matter had been settled: "My man will accompany the *amito*. The temperature is too warm for Niña."

The negro opened the door and Niña Chole urged me with signs and caresses to follow him. Once outside with the old slave, I began to hear his laments and the whining story of his troubles. He held his head down as he walked beside me like a dog, through the crowds, beginning again and again the constantly interrupted complaint of an outcast jealous lover.

"Always, always, after men, *amito!* She is terrible! And not with white men, son, not with white men! Once on the rampage she is all for the blacks. Tell me, can anything be more shameful, son—"

His voice whined on painfully, the old voice of his days of slavery.



We made our way through the fair; at the edge of a grove of shadowy cocoanut trees the creoles were gathered to drink and sing with shouts of applause and hand-clapping. Wine glistened in the cups while the Spanish guitar, sultana of the feast, retold its old Moorish stories of love and jealousy under the white moon of the Alpujarra. The long-drawn *guajiras* died away under the tramping of the horses. Asiatics, Chinese and Japanese traders were swept along in the tumult, still maintaining their sad, drooping air as though no light mood could ever penetrate their skulls. With their waxen figures they slid by on slippers among these darker people,

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peddling in feminine voices their sandalwood fans and tortoise-shell walking-sticks.

Seated in the doorways of the huts were ragged Indians decked out with amulets and strings of coral; they were selling bananas and cocoanuts; aged for all their thirty years, wrinkled and withered, with the strange rigidity of idols. Their shoulders shone lustrous in the sunlight; their black heavy breasts recalled memories of the orgies of witches and hobgoblins. Huddled alongside the road, as though they shivered ever under the ardent sun, were old women like sibyls of some archaic lubrical rite, spitting their curses on the crowd. Their diabolically beautiful children, in the midst of their dirt, ran prying between the chinks of the hovels and, lifting up the canvas folds of the tents, listened to the squealing of the broken hand-organs. Mulatto women and ranchmen were performing the strange, voluptuous dances brought by the slaves from the African jungles, and scarlet petticoats waved in the same twists and turns of the sacred dances to which, in the primeval shadow of the *baobab*, the captives met their sacrificial death.

We had passed through the fair, but the rare white horses we had heard were nowhere to be seen. We were turning back when I felt a touch on my arm. It was Niña Chole, looking very pale but trying to smile with her trembling lips; there was a deep perturbation in her eyes as she placed both her hands on my shoulders and cried with an artificial gladness: "Listen, I don't wish you to be annoyed—"

Seizing my arm, she continued: "I was bored and went out. Near the hut a cock-fight was going on. You understand? I stopped to gamble and I lost."

She paused to indicate with a graceful gesture of her head the blond young giant, who was bowing extravagantly.

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"This gentleman had the credit of being able to help me."

Such strange proceedings as these have always produced in my mind a dull, jealous feeling; so I said, with all the haughtiness of which I was capable: "How much has the señora lost?"

I had imagined that the player would gallantly refuse to accept a recompense and I desired to force him by my cold, scornful tone to do so. The handsome youth merely smiled courteously: "Before betting the señora told me she had no money. Then we arranged that each of her kisses was worth one hundred testoons; she bet three kisses and lost each time."

I felt myself turning white, but what was my chagrin when I beheld Niña Chole, clasping her hands, advancing in a pale, half-tragic manner, saying: "I shall pay! I shall pay!"

I held her back and, facing the handsome youth, I muttered in a mechanical voice: "This lady belongs to me and so do her debts."

Then I turned away, taking Niña Chole with me. We walked for some time in silence; suddenly squeezing my arm she whispered softly: "Oh, what a cavalier you are!"

I did not answer. Niña Chole began to weep silently and leaned her head on my shoulder; then, with a sudden burst of passion she exclaimed: "My God! What would I not do for you!"



We reached the hut; frowning in my bad humour I threw myself into the hammock and shouted to the escort to saddle the horses for an immediate departure. The black face of a negro appeared at the entrance: "Señor, the horse that Niña uses has lost a shoe. Shall we have it re-shod, señor?"

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I sprang up in the hammock with such ferocity that the Indian drew back frightened. Then I controlled myself and cried: "Hurry like a thousand devils, Cuactemocin!"

Niña Chole looked at me pale and imploring: "Do not shout. You don't know how anxious you make me."

I closed my eyes without answering and a long silence fell upon the dark, warm hut. The negro came and went, silently sprinkling the grass that was scattered over the floor. Outside could be heard the hoofs of the horses and the voices of the Indians getting the harness ready. In the light of the open doorway large horseflies were buzzing away at their summer symphony. Niña Chole rose and came over to me. She ran her fingers softly through my hair, sighing softly: "Oh, would you have killed me if that Russian had been a man?"

"No."

"Or have killed him?"

"No."

"You would have done nothing?"

"Nothing."

"And because you despise me?"

"Because you are not the Marquise de Bradomín."

She stood a moment, irresolute, with trembling lips. I closed my eyes in expectation of her tears, complaints and protests, but Niña Chole remained silent and went on smoothing my hair like a submissive slave. At last her fairy fingers dissipated my anger and I felt ready to pardon her. I understood that her offence was that of the eternal feminine and I was so much in love that I could only indulge her. No doubt Niña Chole was as curious and perverse as the wife of Lot who was turned to salt; but after all these centuries, even divine justice has shown itself more lenient with women than with men. Without reasoning I fell under the temptation of

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admiring her glorious descent from her old prototype in the Scriptures. It was evident that high heaven had pardoned Niña Chole, so the Marquis de Bradomín could do no less. With a heart freed from all rancour, I opened my eyes under the gentle caress of her fingers and murmured with a smile: "Niña, I don't know what potion you have given me that I forget everything—"

She replied, her cheeks red as roses: "It is because I am not the Marquise de Bradomín."

Her silence then seemed to await some lover's excuse, but I preferred to maintain my dignity and deemed that I offered her sufficient amends in kissing her hand. She drew it away slowly, and in the stillness her lovely eyes, like those of some Oriental princess, filled up with tears. Fortunately they did not roll down her cheeks, so that when the Indian reappeared at the door, leading our horses, she was able to leave the hut immediately without a sign of weeping. She seemed quite calm as she appeared at the doorway. I held the stirrup for her to mount and a few minutes later we were ambling gaily through the high-road of the fair.

A horseman crossed the road in front of us, prancing about, and it seemed to me that Niña Chole grew pale as she saw him and wound herself in her shawl. I pretended not to notice this and said nothing in order not to appear jealous. Then as we went along the red, dusty road I made out other horsemen posted far off on a hill-top; as though they were waiting for us, they broke into a gallop when we came around the hill. Hardly had I seen them when I ordered my troop to draw up. The leader of the band advanced shouting fiercely and digging his spurs into his mount. Niña Chole recognised him and with a cry slipped from her horse to the ground, imploring pardon with outstretched arms: "Do my

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eyes behold you! Kill me now that you have me! My king! My beloved king!"

The rider drew up his horse in a challenging manner and turned to me; whereupon Niña Chole seized his reins, tragically shouting: "Not his life, no! Not his life!"

This final touch of tenderness moved my heart. I was at the head of my escort, who seemed greatly frightened, and the horseman, rising in his stirrups, counted us with a fiery glance that fell on me in a fury. Without opening his lips to remark on my apparent fear, he raised his whip and slashed Niña Chole across the face. She was still crying: "My king! My beloved king!"

He then leaned over the bunch of pistols at his saddle and snatched her rudely up beside him. He turned and fled like the raider of heroic times, hurling terrible threats at me. Pale and silent I saw her carried off. I might perhaps have rescued her, but I did not do so. On other occasions I have been a great sinner, but now as I realised who this man was I was filled with repentance. Niña Chole, both as daughter and wife of this wild Mexican, belonged to him, and my heart bowed down in recognition of these two sacred claims. Disillusioned forever with love and with life, I dug spurs into my horse and galloped out on the lonely plains of Tixul, followed by my men, who were chattering under their breath about the strange occurrence. All her Indians had made haste to follow the raider who was making off with their mistress. Like her, they appeared to be under the spell of General Diego Bermudez's whip. I felt a fierce, sad haughtiness overcoming me. My enemies, even those who accuse me of all kinds of crime, can never say that I recanted on account of a woman. Never have I been more faithful to my device: "Scorn for others without love for self."

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Bending under the blazing sun, the reins loose on the horses' necks, silent, fatigued and parched, we made our way across the sandy wastes, led by the distant vision of the Lake of Tixul with its bright emerald green and the slow fresh waves moistening the tops of the osiers reflected in their enchanted depths. We crossed the long dunes, deserts without breath or sound. The lizards moved over the burning sands, wriggling with the ecstasy of ancient fakirs, and the sun shed its fire on the sterile earth as if to punish it for some ancient geological crime. Our horses, worn by the long journey, drooped their long necks, heaving with the heat and weariness; with dragging, bloody flanks they toiled along, digging their hoofs into the treacherous sands. Hour after hour we wearied our eyes gazing on the chalky-white horizon. A sort of seasickness lay on our lids, which closed drowsily only to open at last to the same dead distances as before.

We passed a long day on horseback across these black sands and my fatigue and sleepiness were so great that I could hardly spur my horse without an effort. I could barely keep my seat. As though it were some torment out of Dante, I could see far off the green Lake of Tixul where we hoped to halt. The twilight was beginning to fall and the sunset rested on the waters in a path of gold as if for the coming of some fairy barge. Even from far off we caught the musky odours of the crocodiles stretched out of the water on the sand-bars. The nervousness of my horse, with his lifted ears and mane, made me sit up in my saddle and seize the reins that had lain loose on his neck. The neighbourhood of the caymans had aroused him and given him the strength to prance back, so that it was necessary to use the spur and put him to a gallop.

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The whole troop followed me. As we approached, the monsters moved slowly into the water. We drew up together on the shore. Some long-winged birds, frightened from their nests in the reeds, flew off at the approach of our riders, who plunged immediately into the stream on horseback, the water coming up to their waists. On a bank opposite stretched a great alligator with open jaws and eyes fixed on the sun, a motionless mass as indifferent as an ancient idol.

The escort hurriedly begged me to dismount, but I refused, for I had suddenly changed my mind and desired to get across the Tixul with the horses before night had fully set in. Heeding my wishes, the Indians of the escort, all of them magnificent horsemen, plunged ahead into the lake in order to effect the crossing armed only with their ranchman's staves. Extravagant flowers spread trembling on the smooth surface among green, ill-smelling grasses. The horsemen, stripped half-naked, advanced in silent caution like a band of black centaurs. They moved on the horses' backs around floating islands of gigantic water-lilies where lively lizards sprang from one flower to another in a gossipy sort of play. These lily fields spread beneath bright clouds of butterflies as though it were some enchanted lake that lay softly radiant, half-shaded in the blue and golden flutter of their wings. The Lake of Tixul was like a garden of fairyland. When I was a boy I used to dream of such gardens. In this garden, too, there dwelt an enchantress, and amid its strange, baleful flowering there were ruddy princes and princesses lying spell-bound.



The band of centaurs had reached the middle of the Tixul when the crocodile that had been lying in ecstasy on the other

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shore slipped softly into the water and disappeared. Not wishing to delay longer, I patted the neck of my horse and persuaded him to enter the lake slowly; when the water had reached my waist he began to swim, and at the same time I discovered that I was encircled with a flock of eyes, red, yellow and cloudy, showing above the surface of the flood. Those eyes looked at me; they were fixed blankly upon me! I confess that for a moment I was seized with a chill and trembled with fear. The sun was setting in front of me, blazing and blinding, so that to avoid it I was forced to lower my gaze to the dull waters of the Tixul, in spite of the dread inspired by the caymans' power to protrude their eyes alone from the water, lidless eyes of monsters turning now in every direction, now resting in one long, fixed glare. Till my horse touched bottom and lurched up on the shore I was unable to breathe easily. The troop was waiting restlessly on the shore. We assembled and continued our way across the black sand-drifts.

There were signs in the sky of a coming storm. The land-breeze was rousing itself to a fury, whirling the sands about as though it wished to take possession of the immense plain where the heat had ruled all day. We spurred our horses, heading against the wind and sand. Before us spread the dunes, indistinct in their melancholy twilight, now and then swept by the apocalyptic gusts of the cyclone. Low over the land flew flocks of buzzards on heavy, uncertain wings. Night was settling down and afar off we caught sight of many bonfires. Now and then a flash of lightning seared the horizon and uncovered the solitary dunes in a livid flame. The horses shook their ears and trembled in a fever. The bonfires swept by the hurricane swayed to and fro and sometimes almost disappeared. The lightning increased, impress-

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ing our vision with a tremulous, sketchy sense of the inhospitable region. Whinnying with terror, our horses shook out their manes, though they were still able to make out their way through the black downfall of rain. The chaotic lightnings gave the vast desert the aspect of the desolate regions of penance, wastes of sand and ashes stretching endlessly around infernal realms.

Following the bonfires we arrived at the edge of a vast meadow where some cocoanut trees were waving their dwarfed, dishevelled tops in the wind. The storm ceased suddenly and already the thunder sounded far away. Two or three dogs ran out to meet us and we could hear more barking farther on. Around the fires we made out several suspicious-looking figures; black faces and gleaming teeth shone in the glow of the flames. We had arrived in a camp of ranchmen, half bandits, half shepherds, who were leading enormous flocks to the fair of Grijalba.

Perceiving our approach, black men and fierce-looking dogs gathered from every side; the men had the beauty that is found only in wild places; they had the dignity of bloody, barbaric kings. In the sky the moon, draped like some lovely widow, smiled softly with her light on the rude and clamorous crowd. At times between the barking and the sharp commands of the shepherds one could hear the bleating of sheep; the odours from their enclosures brought us vigorous country breaths of primitive life. The sheep-bells tinkled intermittently, and in the fires flamed up sudden gusts from odorous faggots, with a smoke as soft and aromatic as that of the rustic sacrifices of the patriarchs of old.

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—{ XXIX }—

Among the tongues of the fire I beheld the form of a woman, naked and dimly defined; I saw it even though I closed my eyes; it appeared with the strange disturbing force of a fevered dream. It troubled me like one of those carnal, mystical visions that of old assailed the holy hermits; for I believed that I had broken forever the amorous bonds of sin and felt that heaven was chastising me and my pride by abandoning me. That form among the flames was Niña Chole. It was her smile, her glance. My heart was filled with sorrow and romantic sighs. My frail body shook with jealousy and anger. All my being cried out for Niña Chole. I regretted that I had not killed her incestuous captor and I was seized by a mad desire to hunt him down across the Mexican wilds. A snake had nested in my heart, a dark green serpent that stung and poisoned me. To free myself from this torment I called the Indian guide. He came obsequiously: "What would the señor wish?"

"Let us continue on our way."

"The time is very bad, señor. The torrents are running heavily."

I hesitated a moment: "How far is it to the estate of Tixul?"

"Two hours' journey, señor."

I started up: "Let them saddle the horses at once."

I waited and warmed myself before the fire while the guide gave orders to make ready for departure. My shadow lengthened fantastically on the earth behind me, and I was oppressed by an ominous sense of mystery. I was about to change my plans when the Indians came with my horse. Near

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the firelight they adjusted the harness. The guide in humble silence took the lead and we set out.

For a long time we went on over undulating country, between giant cactus plants swayed by the wind into a murmur like that of running water. Now and then the moon pierced through the assailing clouds and lighted our journey with a feeble glow. Before my horse flew some bird of the night; slightly in advance it would rest until I approached and then, on its dark pinions, it would go farther ahead, croaking and complaining. My guide, superstitious like all the Indians, heard in the sound a challenge to his faith, and each time the bird uttered its offence, spreading its wings, he replied solemnly: "Christian, very Christian."

I asked him: "What bird is that?"

"The *tapa-caminos*, señor."

It was thus we reached my domains. The residence, built under the orders of a viceroy, had all the signorinal dignity of an aristocratic country-house in Spain. There was a group of horsemen drawn up before the entrance. By their air I judged them to be highwaymen. They formed a circle where calabashes full of coffee were passing from one to the other. Their embroidered hats glittered in the moonlight. An old horseman was stationed in the middle of the road; he had lost one of his hands and fierce eyes gleamed in his dusky face. He called to us: "Halt there."

I answered him sharply, rising in my saddle: "I am the Marquis de Bradomín."

He turned and galloped off to the others, who were drinking their coffee before the door. I could see them clearly putting their heads together in counsel, lifting their reins and starting away. When I reached the door there was nobody

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there, though the galloping of their horses could still be heard. The overseer who was waiting at the threshold approached to receive me and, taking the horse by the bridle, he led us to the house, crying: "Bring out a lamp! Light up the staircase!"

The dark form of an old woman appeared at an upper window with a lighted lamp: "Blessed be God who has brought you through so many dangers!"

And she leaned out of the window, stretching down a dark arm that trembled with the light. We entered the vestibule and at the same time the old woman appeared at the head of the staircase: "Blessed and honoured be God for the great nobility and excellence of your blood!"

The old woman led us to a whitewashed hall with all its windows open. She set the lamp down on the table and turned to go: "Blessed be God, what a gallant youth he is!"

I sat down and the overseer stood at a short distance gazing at me. He was one of Don Carlos's old soldiers who had emigrated after the treachery of Vergara. His deep, dark eyes glistened with tears. I held my hand out to him familiarly: "Be seated, Brión. What troop was that?"

"Brigands, señor."

"Friends of yours?"

"Good friends! You have to live here just as your grandmother, my lady the Countess de Barbazón, lived on her estates in Andalusia. José Maria treated her like a queen, for my lady was one of his greatest protectresses."

The old woman now came in to say that supper was ready. I rose and she took up the lamp to light my way.

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I went to bed, worn out, but the thought of Niña Chole kept me awake until near daybreak. All my efforts to drive away the memory were in vain; it turned and turned in my mind, piercing the body of my thoughts in a troublous, fantastic manner. Sometimes I would start up suddenly from my drowsiness; at last, entirely played out, I fell into a feverish slumber that was heavy with painful shadows. Suddenly I opened my eyes in the darkness, surprised to find myself completely awake. Again I tried to get to sleep but failed. A dog began to bark under my window and I vaguely remembered having heard him before in my sleep. I buried my head nervously in my pillows; the moonlight lay across the room, as I had left the windows open on account of the heat. It seemed to me that I heard voices of people in the garden. The dog had ceased his barking and the voices died away. Again, when everything was in silence, I heard the sounds of heels galloping off. I rose to close the window. The gates of the garden were open but the road between its waving maize-fields seemed deserted. I stood a long time looking out. The fields stretched away like death in the white light of the moon; a soft wind was all that stirred the region. Feeling that sleep would now be possible I closed the window and got into bed with a strange sensation. Hardly had I closed my eyes when the sharp echo of musketry aroused me; the shots were answered by others farther off, and again I heard the galloping of a horse. I was about to get up when silence settled down again. After some time there came sounds from the garden as if somebody was digging with a spade. This must have happened when it was almost morning, as I then fell asleep.

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When the overseer came to awaken me, I had doubts that he had slept; however I asked him: "What fight was that last night, Brión?"

The overseer bowed his head in sorrow: "Last night they killed one of the bravest of the brave in Mexico!"

"How did they kill him?"

"With a bullet, señor."

"A bullet, whose bullet?"

"Some son of an evil woman."

"Did the bandits come out badly?"

"Badly, señor."

"You took part?"

The overseer raised his ardent glance to mine: "I? Never, señor."

The arrogance with which he pressed his hand against his heart made me smile, as the old soldier, with his sunburnt face, his hat drawn down on his forehead, his shadowed eyes and the machete at his side, looked to me, as much a bandit as a gentleman. He hesitated a moment and then, stroking his beard, he said: "Your Excellency might as well know that if I am friendly to the bandits it is because I wish their help. They are a race of braves and will aid me. Ever since I came to this country I have had only one thought. Would Your Excellency like to hear it? It is to make Carlos V emperor here!"

The old soldier wiped away a tear and fixed a steady look on me as I replied: "We shall give him an empire, Brión."

The overseer's eyes glistened under their grey lashes: "He shall have it, señor. And afterwards the crown of Spain."

His eyes filled with tears; he was unable to control the emotion that trembled under his Moorish-looking beard. He turned to the window and looked out in silence. Then he

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sighed: "Last night we lost the man who might have aided us the most. He is buried in the shadow of yonder cedar."

"Who was he?"

"The leader of all the bandits hereabouts, Your Excellency."

"And his men were also killed?"

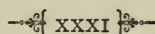
"They were scattered in the panic. They had carried off a beautiful creole lady who had a good deal of money and they left her in a swoon in the middle of the road. I took pity on her and brought her here. Would Your Excellency like to see her?"

"Is she really beautiful?"

"Beautiful as a saint!"

I rose and followed the overseer out of doors. The creole was in the garden lying in a hammock stretched between two trees. Some Indian children were disputing who should rock her; she was weeping with her handkerchief over her eyes. Hearing our steps, she turned her head languidly and sighed: "My king! My beloved king!"

Without opening my lips, I took her in my arms. I have always maintained that in lapses of love everything is comprised in that divine maxim which bids us to forget injuries.



Glad and capricious, she bit my hands to keep them still. She did not wish me to touch her. She stood smiling before the mirror, her hair let down around her. It seemed as though she had forgotten my presence and smiled in gazing at her reflection, while in the manner of an Oriental princess she anointed herself with perfumes. Then, wrapped in silks and laces, she stretched herself in the hammock and waited,

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her trembling lids cast down, her mouth smiling ever, in what some poet of to-day would call a song of snow and roses. Strange as it may appear, I did not approach her. I wished to indulge my sight with her; with the profound, exquisite, sadistic science of the decadent, I wished to hold back my other senses in the sacred calmness of the night. Over the open balcony stretched the dome of heaven, hardly lighted by the moon. The breeze through the garden scattered perfumes and whispers, the romantic message of falling rose-petals. Everything was amorous and tender. The candle-lights swayed with the dancing shadows on the walls. Down the dark corridor the cuckoo-clock, dating from the days of the viceroys, sounded the midnight-call. Soon after, we heard the crowing of a cock. Niña Chole whispered in my ear: "Tell me, has there ever been a reconciliation as sweet as ours?"

My only answer was to put my lips to hers to seal them, for silence is the holy ark of pleasure. Niña Chole, however, who had the habit of chattering in these supreme moments, soon continued: "It is for you to pardon me. If we had remained undisturbed together, we should not have the joy we now possess. It is for you to pardon me."

Although my poor heart was bleeding slightly, I pardoned her. My lips once more sought her cruel mouth. There is no need to confess that I had been much of a hero in all this. Her words held the perverse, passionate spell of flaming lips that bite when they kiss. Clasped in my arms she murmured: "Never have we loved like this! Never, never!"

It was a flourishing May-time of loves; roses of Alexandria scattered from her lips! Tuberoses of Judea were unpetaled on her breasts! Poor Niña Chole, who after so much sin had yet to learn that the ultimate delight is to be

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found in these cowardly reconciliations after cruel abandonments. Mine was the glory of enlightening her. In the depths of those cruel eyes, where I seemed to see forever the obscure riddle of her treacheries, I could see also how much it had cost her to approach the altars of the Turbulent Venus. Since that time I have pitied the unhappy beings who, betrayed by a woman, consume themselves and never kiss her again. For them the mystery of the exaltation of the flesh remains eternal.



Sonata of Autumn

—❖ I ❖—



LOVE of my life, I am dying—my one desire is to see you.” It is long now since that letter from poor Concha came to wring my heart. It was heavy with yearning and sadness, with the perfume of violets and remote love. I kissed it before reading to the end. Nearly two years were gone since she had written me, and now she called me to her side, ardently, sorrowfully imploring. The three emblazoned sheets bore traces of tears—piteous marks that eternity cannot obliterate. Withdrawn from the world, in the old Brandeso Palace, poor Concha was dying and she called to me with an infinite longing. Those perfect hands, perfumed and pale, the hands that once I had loved so much, had written to me again. Tears filled my eyes.

The hope that our dead love might live again had remained with me always; vague, nostalgic, undefined, it

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breathed into my life a faint aroma of faith—the sweet chimera of the future, asleep in the depths of the azure lakes that mirror the stars of destiny. Sad destiny for her and for me! The rose of our love was to bloom again only to shed compassionate petals over a tomb. Poor Concha was dying.

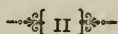
I received her letter at Viana del Prior where I went every autumn to hunt. The Brandeso Palace lies but a few leagues distant. I felt that, before starting upon my way, I would like to talk with Concha's sisters, Maria Isabel and Maria Fernanda, and I went to see them. They were both nuns in the sisterhood of the Comendadoras. They came into the parlour and extended to me through the bars of the grating the chaste, patrician hands of virgin brides of the Church. As children we had played together in the great halls of the old baronial palace, and now they talked to me simply and without formality. Both repeated mournfully that Concha was dying.

I left the sisters with heavy sadness in my heart. The bell for the nuns was ringing; I entered the church, which was still deserted, and knelt down in the shadow of a pillar. The dim stillness was broken by the footsteps of two women who were visiting the altars, austere and solemn in their dress of heavy black. They seemed to be two sisters, mourning a common sorrow, imploring a common grace. From time to time they exchanged a hushed word, sighed and relapsed into silence. Thus they made the rounds of the seven altars, side by side, rigid, disconsolate. The uncertain flame of a dying lamp at moments threw a livid light over the two women and left them once more wrapped in shadow. The murmur of their prayers came to me faintly; in the white hands of the sister who led, I could distinguish the rosary. It was of mother-of-pearl with cross and medals of silver.

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I remembered that Concha used to pray with such a rosary. She had scruples about permitting me to play with it, for poor Concha was very devout and the belief that our love was a mortal sin caused her poignant grief. On many a night of tryst I have entered Concha's boudoir to find her upon her knees. . . . Without speaking, she raises fervid eyes to mine, beseeching silence; I sink down in a great armchair and watch her pray as the beads of the rosary pass slowly and reverently between her pale fingers. Sometimes, not waiting for the prayers to end, I draw near and take her in my arms; she turns still paler and covers her eyes with her hands. I love with a veritable frenzy that sorrowful mouth, the quivering lips held closed and cold as lips in death. Concha nervously frees herself and, rising, replaces the rosary in its casket. Then, her arms flung about my neck, she lays a fainting head upon my shoulder and weeps—weeps from love and the fear of eternal punishment. . . .

When I returned home from my visit to the sisters, night had fallen. I passed the evening alone and sad in my big chair before the fire. I had fallen asleep. Suddenly loud knocks upon the door broke the silence. In the still hours of the night the sound was awesome and sepulchral. I jumped up, startled, and opened the window. It was the servant who had brought Concha's letter, come to tell me that we must start upon our journey.



Concha's major-domo, an old countryman wearing the hooded cape of frieze and wooden shoes of the Galician peasant, was stationed before the door astride of his mule, holding another by the bridle.

"What is it, Brión?" I called into the darkness.

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“Dawn, Señor Marquis.”

I descended promptly without stopping to shut the window, which was rattling in the gusty wind, and we started off without delay. A few stars were still shining when Brión called me; as we took the road I heard the cocks of the neighbouring hamlet begin to crow. With the best of luck we could not reach the Palace before sundown; though the distance is but nine leagues, the rough road over the mountain is hard on the mules' feet. The old peasant at once took the lead to show the way and we passed through Quintana de San Clodio at a trot, beset by a chorus of barks from the watchdogs tied under the grain-cribs on every farm.

Day was breaking when we reached the open country. Far away a line of hills loomed desolately through the fog; beyond them, others and yet others lay stretched under white shrouds of mist; they seemed never-ending, far as the eye could see. In the distance a pack of laden mules filed slowly across La Puente del Prior. The muleteer, riding side-saddle on his old horse, ambled along behind, singing a song of his native Castile. The sun touched the tops of the hills with gold; flocks of sheep, black and white, climbed the slopes; far off in the valley spread the green lands of a stately palace, and above its ancient towers flights of doves wheeled white against the sky.

As we rode on rain overtook us. We dismounted at the old Gundar mills and, with the air of lords of the domain, knocked authoritatively at the door. Two lean dogs rushed out barking at the major-domo and behind them appeared a woman spinning. The old countryman saluted her piously: “Ave Maria Purisima.”

The girl responded: “Immaculate Mother of God.”

She seemed a simple creature, full of kindness. When

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she saw that we were stiff with cold, saw the mules huddled under the shed and the threatening sky, she threw the door hospitably open. "Enter and sit by the fire," she said humbly. "It's bad weather for travellers. Ah, what weather! With the crops all under water. . . . There's a lean year ahead of us!"

We had scarcely entered when Brión went back for the saddlebags, while I walked to the hearth where a wretched fire was smouldering. The girl poked the embers into life and brought an armful of wet green twigs that hissed and sputtered as they gave out clouds of resinous smoke. At the back of the room a rickety door, the stones of its ancient sill white with flour, creaked incessantly. Tac! tac! tac! The voice of an old man starting a song and the hum of the mill-wheel came from the room beyond.

The major-domo returned with the saddlebags hanging over his shoulder. "Here is our luncheon," he said. "The Señora got up from her bed to prepare it with her own hands. Saving Your Excellency, I think we should take advantage of this chance to eat, for if the rain closes in again we shall have no let-up before night."

The miller's daughter approached us, humbly solicitous: "I'll set a trivet by the fire in case you would like to warm the food." As she placed the little iron stand, the major-domo drew out a large damask napkin, spread it over the hearthstone and began to empty the saddlebags. I walked to the doorway and stood for a long time watching the grey curtain of rain undulate in the wind.

After a while Brión approached me with respectful familiarity: "Whenever Your Excellency is ready. . . . We've a fine feast, I tell you!"

I went back into the kitchen and sat down by the fire.

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I felt no desire to eat, and I ordered Brión to serve me nothing but a cup of wine. The old peasant obeyed in silence. He drew a leathern bottle from one of the saddlebags and poured out the sparkling red wine from the vineyards of the palace, using one of the little cups that our forebears had fashioned from the silver soles of Peru, one cup from a coin. I drank off the wine and, in order to escape from the thick smoke of the kitchen, returned to my place in the doorway. Thence I bade the major-domo eat, and the girl as well. She asked permission to summon the old man who was singing in the next room.

“Father! Father!” she called loudly. He came in, his coat white with flour, with his cap over one ear, the song still on his lips—a silver-haired old man with a merry eye, as waggish as a book of ballads.

They drew rough, smoke-begrimed stools before the fire and sat down to eat amid a chorus of benedictions, while the two lean dogs circled hungrily around them. It was the loving forethought of poor, sick Concha that had spread the feast; like the anointed hands of a saintly princess of legend, the pale hands that I had loved so much were serving at the table of the lowly.

Before touching his wine the old miller rose to his feet and droned out in a monotone: “To the health of the noble caballero who gives this wine! May we live to celebrate for many a year to come the day we drink it in his noble presence!”

After the old man, the others drank with equal ceremony. They talked in lowered voices as they ate; the miller asked where we were going. The major-domo answered, to the Brandeso Palace; the old man knew that road well; he paid a tithe, dating from ancient times, to the Señora of the

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Palace . . . a tithe of two ewes, seven quarter-bushels of wheat and seven quarter-bushels of rye; the past year there had been a great drought and her ladyship had remitted all the grain; she was a kind señora who had sympathy for the poor peasant. . . .

As I stood in the doorway watching the rain fall, I heard their words and was touched and pleased. I turned my head and let my glance stray over the group gathered in the smoke about the fire. Their voices sank still lower and it seemed they were talking of me.

The major-domo rose. "If it please Your Excellency," he said, "I'll go now and see to the mules and we will be on our way."

The miller offered his help and they left the room together. At the back of the kitchen the dogs were growling over a bone. The girl began to sweep the hearth. As she gathered the ashes, the poor creature mumbled an endless stream of benedictions: "God grant you good health and good fortune! May joy meet you when you reach the Palace! God will that you find the Señora well! With the colour of the roses in her cheeks!"

With each sweep of the broom the poor soul repeated monotonously: "God will that you find her blooming like a rose! Like a rose on a rosebush!"

Taking advantage of a clearing in the weather, the major-domo came in for the saddlebags while the miller untied the mules and led them from the shed for us to mount. The girl came and stood in the doorway to watch us: "May the noble caballero go in happiness! And the Lord be with him!"

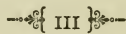
When we were mounted she came out to the road. She had flung an apron of heavy cloth over her head to shield her from the rain which was beginning to fall again. She came

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close to me with an air of mystery. The draped figure might have been some spirit of a thousand centuries ago. Her flesh was quivering and her eyes burned hotly beneath the folds of the mantle. She held a bunch of herbs in her hands. With the bearing of a prophetess she reached them out to me, murmuring in a low voice: "When you are with my Lady, place these herbs beneath her pillow. Let her not know of it. They will make her well. Souls are like nightingales—they long to try their wings. Nightingales sing in gardens, but in royal palaces they pine and die."

The old miller came up smiling and pushed the girl aside to make way for the mules. "Give no heed, Señor," he said. "She's just a simpleton, poor child!"

I felt the dark wing of superstition brush across my soul as I silently took the bunch of rain-drenched herbs—sweet-scented, wholesome herbs that can cure alike a longing soul or an ailing sheep, add to the store of homely remedies or swell the harvest. . . . But a little while and they would flower above poor Concha's grave in the fragrant green cemetery of San Clodio de Brandeso.



I had a vague remembrance of the Brandeso Palace where as a child I had visited with my mother. I remembered the ancient garden with its green labyrinth that frightened and yet attracted me. I was returning after all these years at the entreaty of the little girl with whom I had so often played in the old flowerless garden.

The sinking sun threw a glow of gold between the black green of the venerable trees—cedars and cypresses, silently attesting the great age of the Palace. The garden had an

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arched gateway with four escutcheons carved in stone above the cornice, bearing the arms of four different lines. Lineage of the founder of the house, noble on all sides of his ancestry!

As the Palace came in sight our tired mules trotted up briskly to the gate and stopped short, impatiently pawing the ground. A peasant dressed in homespun was waiting at the entrance and hurried forward to hold my stirrup. I dismounted, throwing him the reins of my mule, and with a spirit heavy with memories penetrated the dark, leaf-strewn avenue of chestnut trees. At the far end I distinguished the Palace, all the windows closed, the panes illumined by the sun. All at once I saw a white shadow pass behind the glass, saw it stop and raise both hands to its forehead; the central window slowly opened and the white phantom greeted me with a waving of ghost-like arms. It lasted but an instant, no more—and the branches of the chestnuts crossed again, blocking my vision. As I emerged from the avenue I searched the windows anew. They were all closed, even the one in the centre.

With a fast-beating heart I entered the great dark hall. My footsteps on the broad flagstones resounded through the silence. Some peasants waiting to pay their tithes were seated along the walls on benches of age-polished oak. In the background stood the antique chests that held the wheat, their covers lifted. On seeing me enter the tithe-payers rose, murmured a respectful "Santas y buenas tardes" and, slowly seating themselves again, remained motionless in the shadows that almost engulfed them. With a quickened step I went up the broad stairs, with their balustrade of rudely carved granite; before I reached the top a door opened noiselessly and a servant, Concha's old nurse, came down the steps to meet me carrying a lamp in her hand. "Thank God you've

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come!" she said. "Now you will see the Señorita. Many's the day the poor child has been crying for you. . . . She wouldn't write to you, for she thought that you'd forgotten her. I persuaded her that you had not. I was not wrong, Señor Marquis?"

I could scarcely murmur: "No. Where is she?"

"She's been lying down all the afternoon. She was anxious to be up and dressed when you came . . . like a child . . . the Señor knows. . . . But her impatience was too much for her. She was shaking so that her teeth chattered and I had to put her to bed."

"Is she so ill?"

The old woman wiped her eyes. "Very ill, Señor. Much changed." And indicating a lighted doorway down the length of the hall, she added in a low tone: "In there."

We went on in silence. Then Concha heard my footsteps and called in an anguished voice: "At last! My life! At last!"

I entered. Concha was lying propped against the pillows. She gave a little cry and, instead of holding out her arms to me, covered her face with her hands and began to sob. The old servant placed the light on a small table, sighed and walked out. Trembling with emotion, I went over to Concha. I kissed the hands she held over her face, then gently drew them down. Without a word she raised her beautiful sick eyes to mine and held me in a long look of intense love. Then, languid with the burden of her happiness, she closed her lids again. I watched her thus for a moment. How pale she was! Anguish squeezed at my throat. She softly opened her eyes, and pressing my temples between her burning hands she gazed long at me again, a look of mute love drowning in the melancholy of approaching death.

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"I feared you would never come."

"And now?"

Her mouth, a pale flower, trembled. "Now I am happy."

She closed her eyes again in ecstasy as if she would imprison in her thoughts a beatific vision.

—{ IV }—

Concha sat up in bed and reached for the bell-rope. I seized her hand: "What do you want?"

"To summon my maid to come and dress me."

"Now?"

"Yes." She leaned her head back and added with a pitiful smile: "I wish to do you the honours of my Palace."

I tried to persuade her not to get up. Concha insisted. "I shall order a fire lighted in the dining-room. A great big fire! I am going to have supper with you."

She turned her soft eyes to me with a wonderfully tender expression on her sweet pale face. "I wanted to stay up till you arrived but I couldn't. I thought I should die of impatience. I felt ill."

Taking her hand in mine I kissed it and we smiled at one another.

"You do not ring. Why?" I asked, adding, just above my breath: "Will you let me be your maid?"

Concha freed her hand: "What a wild idea!"

"I disagree. Where are your clothes?"

Concha smiled as a mother smiles at the whim of a child: "I don't know where they are."

"Come now, tell me."

"But I don't know!" As she spoke a roguish movement of eyes and lips indicated a large oak wardrobe which stood at

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the foot of the bed. The key was in the lock and I opened it. The faint fragrance of an antique perfume drifted from its depths where hung the garments that Concha was to wear that day.

"Are these what you want?"

"Yes . . . that white gown . . . nothing else."

"You won't be cold?"

"No."

As I lifted down the soft white tunic a perfumed warmth seemed still to cling to it.

"Foolish fancy!" Concha murmured in confusion.

I drew her little feet from under the bedclothes. They were white and fragile as a child's, with blue veins tracing perfect paths for kisses. With an ecstatic shiver Concha thrust her feet into the slippers of soft dark fur. Her voice seemed singularly sweet: "Now open the big chest. Choose a pair of stockings for me."

I selected a pair of black silk, embroidered with lavender clocks. "Will these do?"

"Yes. Any you like."

I dropped to my knees on the tiger-skin beside the bed to put them on.

Concha protested: "No, no. Get up. I do not wish to see you so!"

Smiling, I disregarded her. The little feet tried to escape my hand. Sweet little feet, I could do no less than kiss them. Concha, quivering with rapture, exclaimed: "Always, always the same!"

Over the black silk stockings I slid the garters, white ribbons clasped with silver. I dressed her with the reverent lover's devotion that pious women bring to the adornment of a Holy Image. With trembling hands I tied the cords of her white

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robe under the sweet round chin, and Concha stood up leaning her weight upon my shoulders. She moved slowly over to her dressing-table with the wraith-like air that illness lends to a beautiful woman. She looked at herself in the glass and smoothed her hair.

"How pale I am!" she sighed. "You see what I am—nothing but skin and bone."

"I see nothing of the kind, Concha," I protested.

She smiled wanly: "Tell me truly. How do I look?"

"Once you were the Princess of the Sun and now you are the Princess of the Moon."

"Flatterer!" She turned her back to the mirror and looked at me, at the same time striking a gong by the dressing-table. The old nurse came in immediately: "Did the Señorita ring?"

"Yes. I wish a fire made in the dining-room."

"There is a good hot brazier in there now."

"Well, have it taken away and have the fire lighted."

The servant gave me a quick look: "Does the Señorita intend to go to the dining-room also? Remember the corridors are very cold."

Concha sat down on the end of the sofa. Voluptuously wrapping the draperies of her nun-like gown about her, she said, with a little shiver: "I can put a shawl around me going through the corridors."

Reluctant to oppose her I was silent. She turned to me now with a sweet submission.

"If it is against your wish I will not go."

"It is not against my wish, Concha," I answered uncomfortably. "I am only afraid it may do you harm."

"But I do not want to leave you all alone," she sighed.

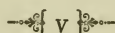
Faithful old Candelaria here made a suggestion: "Naturally you wish to be together. That's why I thought you

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would have your supper here at the little table. What do you think of that, Señorita Concha? And you, Señor Marquis?"

Concha laid her hand on my shoulder and answered laughingly: "Of course! Of course! You are a genius, Candelaria! Accept our sincere gratitude. You may tell Teresina we will have our supper here."

We were alone. Concha with eyes blinded by tears held out her hand to me and, as in other days, my lips crept tenderly over the fingers and brought pale roses to the tips. A bright fire was burning on the hearth. Seated on the floor before it, with an elbow resting on my knee, Concha poked the logs with the great bronze tongs. As the flame sprang upward it spread a faint rose tint on the eucharistic whiteness of her face—like sunlight on antique Pharos marbles.



Concha dropped the tongs and held out her arms for me to lift her from the floor. Our eyes met in a long deep look that held the shining happiness one sees in the eyes of a child who forgets a sorrow and laughs through its tears. The little table was now spread. Still clasping hands, we took our seats in the big chairs that Teresina had just placed for us.

"Do you remember," Concha asked, "how many years it is since you were here with your mother?"

"Yes, I remember. Do you?"

"Twenty-three years ago! I was eight. I fell in love with you then. What I used to suffer when you played with my big sisters! It seems impossible that a child could suffer so from jealousy. Later, when I grew up, you caused me many tears too, but then I had the consolation of upbraiding you."

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"Yet how sure you have always been of my love. Your letter is proof of that."

Concha winked away the tears that trembled on her lashes: "I was not sure of your love, only of your compassion."

Her mouth curved in a mournful smile and two tears shone bright in her eyes. I wanted to get up and comfort her, but she stopped me with a look. Teresina entered. We began to eat in silence. To dissemble her tears Concha raised her glass and slowly sipped her wine. As she was replacing it on the table I took the glass from her hand and touched my lips where hers had been. Concha turned to the maid: "Tell Candelaria to come and wait upon us."

Teresina left the room. I looked at Concha and we both smiled.

"Why do you send for Candelaria?"

"Because I am afraid of you, and poor old Candelaria fears nothing in the world."

"And Candelaria, like a good Jesuit, looks upon our love with indulgence."

"Let us not begin that . . . let us not begin!" In pretty annoyance Concha shook her head and touched a finger to her pale lips: "I will not permit you to pose as another Pietro Aretino, or as a Cesare Borgia either."

Poor Concha was extremely pious, and the æsthetic admiration which, in my youth, I professed for the son of Pope Alexander VI, inspired her with as much fear as if it had been the cult of the devil himself. She laughingly exaggerated her fear now: "Be still . . . be still," she begged, with a roguish sidewise glance at me. Then, turning her head slightly: "Candelaria, fill my glass with wine. . . ."

Candelaria, who was standing behind the chair with hands crossed on the front of her starched apron, hastened to serve

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her. Concha's voice, but a moment since sweet with happiness, trailed off in a moan. I saw her eyes close in a spasm of anguish and her mouth, a sick white rose, turned whiter still. I started up terrified: "What is it? What is the matter?"

She was unable to speak. Her head fell dully back against the chair. Candelaria ran to the dressing-table and brought a bottle of smelling-salts. Concha drew a sighing breath and opened wandering, bewildered eyes as if she were awaking from a dream peopled with chimeras. Fixing her gaze on me, she murmured feebly: "It was nothing. I am sorry you were frightened."

She passed her hand over her forehead, breathing distressfully. I forced her to take a few sips of broth. It seemed to revive her and a faint smile illumined her pallor. She made me sit down again while she continued to take the broth by herself. When it was finished, she reached out slender fingers for the wine-glass and sweetly, tremblingly, offered it to me. To please her I touched it to my lips, then Concha drained the glass and drank no more that night.

—{ VI }—

We were seated upon the sofa and had been talking long together. Poor Concha had been telling me of her life during the two years that we had not seen each other—a life of silent resignation, watching the days pass with a sad smile and weeping through the darkness of the night. I had no need to tell her of my life. Her eyes seemed to have followed it from afar and to know it completely. Poor Concha! Seeing her now, wasted by illness, so changed, so different from her former self, I felt a bitter remorse that I had ever listened to her entreaty on that night when, weeping, upon

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her knees, she had begged me to go away and forget her. Her sainted mother, black-robed and sorrowful, had come to part us.

But neither of us desired to remember the past; we fell silent, she in resignation, I assuming an expression of gloomy tragedy the memory of which now brings a smile to my lips. It was a beautiful gesture of a kind that I have rather forgotten, for since lovely woman does not succumb to the seductions of an old Don Juan the pose is only seemly in a young one. Ah, yes, if now, with my white locks and fallen cheeks and senatorial beard, some pure young thing were to love me—some daughter of the stars arrayed in grace and candour—I should deem it criminal to adopt any other attitude toward her than that of the venerable prelate, the confessor of princesses, versed in naught of love but its theology. But with poor Concha the pose of Satan repentant stirred her to passion and made her tremble. She was very good and, in consequence, very unhappy. The poor child summoned a sorrowful smile, the ultimate expression of her sick heart.

“How different our lives might have been,” she murmured.

“True. I do not understand now how I ever yielded to your entreaty. It must have been because you cried.”

“Don’t be untruthful. I expected you would come back. . . . And my mother always had the fear.”

“I didn’t come back because I was waiting for you to send for me. . . . The devil, pride!”

“Ah, no, it was not pride. . . . It was another woman. . . . You had been unfaithful to me for a long time. When I learned of it I believed I would die. I felt so desperate that I agreed to live with my husband again.”

She crossed her hands and fixed her intense eyes upon me. Her pale mouth was quivering. “What agony when I realised

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why you did not come!" she sobbed. "But never, not for a single day, did I feel any bitterness toward you."

I had no courage at the moment to attempt deception, so I maintained a romantic silence. Concha passed her hands over my hair and clasped her fingers about my forehead: "What a wild life you've led these two years!" she sighed. "Your hair is almost white."

I, too, sighed dolefully: "Ah, Concha, that is from grief."

"No, not grief . . . something else. . . . Your grief could never have equalled mine, yet my hair is not white."

I sat up to look and pulled out the gold pin holding the heavy knot. The silky black wave rolled over her shoulders.

"Your forehead burns like a white star under that ebony mass. You are pure and pale as the moon. . . . Do you remember how I used to long to be whipped with those heavy tresses? Concha, cover me with them now."

Tenderly compliant, she spread over me the perfumed veil of hair. With my face buried in the scented mass I drew a breath as from a sacred fountain, and my spirit was rapturously transported to a blossoming garden of memories. Concha's heart was beating violently; with shaking hands I unfastened her loose gown and pressed my lips against the bare flesh, soft with the anointment of love's balm.

"My life!"

"My life!"

Concha closed her eyes for a moment. Then quickly she was on her feet, gathering up the loose coils of her hair: "Go. For God's sake, go."

I looked at her and smiled: "Where would you have me go?"

"Go. . . . Emotion exhausts me. I must rest. I wrote for you to come because there can be nothing between us now

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but a spiritual love. You surely understand that, ill as I am, nothing else is possible. To die in mortal sin . . . how horrible!”

Paler than ever, she crossed her two arms over her breast, laying her hands upon her shoulders in a characteristic pose of exalted resignation. I moved toward the door: “Good-bye, Concha.”

She drew a sighing breath: “Good-bye.”

“Will you be good enough to call Candelaria to guide me through the corridors?”

“Ah, it’s true you don’t know yet . . .”

She walked to the dressing-table and touched the gong. We waited in silence. No one came. Concha looked at me uncertainly: “Candelaria must have gone to bed.”

“In that case . . .”

She saw my smile and shook her head, gravely sorrowful: “In that case I will be your guide.”

“But you shouldn’t go out.”

“Yes, yes.”

She took up one of the candelabra from the dressing-table and went swiftly to the door, trailing her long nun-like draperies. On the threshold she turned her head, calling me with her eyes and, white as a phantom, vanished into the dark corridor. I followed, exclaiming as I caught up with her: “Foolish child!”

With a silent little laugh she grasped my arm and leaned close to me.

The crossing of two corridors opened out into a vast circular ante-chamber, dismantled but for the pictures of saints and ancient chests along the walls. A small oil lamp, burning in a niche, threw a dying circle of light before the torn, discoloured feet of Jesus of Nazareth. We stopped as we saw

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the outline of a woman huddled by a window. It was Candelaria, asleep, with hands crossed in her lap and head sunk upon her breast. At the sound of our footsteps she waked with a start: "Ah! . . . I was waiting here to show the Señor Marquis to his room."

"I thought you had gone to bed," Concha answered.

We went on in silence until we reached an open door where there was a light. Concha let go of my arm and stood still, trembling and very pale. Finally, she went in. It was my bedroom. Candles were burning in silver candelabra, placed on an antique console. Against the far wall stood the bed with coverings of antique damask. Concha's eyes examined the room with maternal solicitude. She stopped to smell the roses standing in a vase and then moved toward the door: "Good-bye till to-morrow."

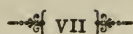
I lifted her in my arms as if she were a child: "I will not let you go."

"Please, yes."

"No, no."

And my eyes laughed into her eyes and my mouth laughed upon her mouth. The Turkish slippers dropped from her feet. Without letting her touch the ground, I carried her to the bed and, with lover-like care, I put her down. She yielded then to happiness. Her eyes shone and over the pure surface of her cheeks two rose-leaves spread. She gently pushed away my hands and began in some confusion to unfasten the soft white gown. As it slid the length of her pale quivering body, she opened the sheets and took refuge between them. Then she began to sob and I sat by the bedside and comforted her. When she seemed to be asleep, I lay down beside her.

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All night long fever burned in the frail body at my side, like a sepulchral light burning in a vase of fragile porcelain. The head rested on the pillows framed in waves of dark hair that enhanced the leaden pallor of her face. The colourless mouth, wan cheeks and wasted temples, the waxen eyelids sunk in violet hollows, gave her the spiritualised loveliness of a beautiful saint consumed by fasts and penitence. Her neck flowered from her shoulders like a drooping lily, her breasts were two white roses perfuming an altar, and the slender, graceful arms encircling her head were the handles of the amphora.

The cock had twice crowed; the light of dawn came palely through the closed windows. The candles in their silver candelabra had burned all night and were now almost entirely gone; their dying glimmer rippled amid the shadows on the ceiling. Thrown across a chair by the bed was my hunting cloak, still damp from the rain; scattered over it lay the mysterious herbs whose occult powers were known to none but the poor mad creature of the mill. I rose softly and gathered them up. With an extraordinary feeling of mingled irony and superstition, I hid the sweet green talisman under Concha's pillow. Without awakening her, I lay down again and pressed my lips against the perfumed hair. Insensibly I fell asleep.

For a long time nebulous visions of the day, savouring vaguely of tears and smiles, floated through my dreams. I think that once, still half asleep, I opened my eyes and saw Concha sitting up at my side. I think she kissed my forehead, smiling dreamily, and raised a finger to her lips. My eyes closed again without volition and I floated off once more

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into the clouds of sleep. When I wakened a luminous ladder of dust stretched from the window to the farthest wall. Concha was no longer there, but presently the door was softly opened and Concha came in on tiptoes carrying fresh sprays of roses in her arms. I pretended to sleep. Without a sound she came close to me, looked at me intently and sighed. She placed the roses in water, then walked to the window and dropped the curtains to soften the light. She was going away, as noiselessly as she had entered, when I called to her, laughing: "Concha, Concha."

She turned: "So you are awake?"

"I was in dreamland with you."

"And now you are with me here."

"How do you feel?"

"Absolutely well."

"Love is a splendid doctor."

"Ah, yes, but we must not abuse his medicine."

We laughed for happiness, again in one another's arms, lips to lips and heads resting on one pillow. Concha was pale with the frail delicate pallor of a Dolorosa and so beautiful in her wan slenderness that my eyes, my lips, my hands found their utter delight in the very things that made me grieve. I confess that I never remember having loved her in the past as madly as I loved her that night.

—❧ VIII ❧—

I had brought no servant with me, and Concha, who indulged in whims, like the princesses of picaresque romance, had placed a page at my service—the better to do me honour, as she laughingly explained. He was a boy whom Concha had taken into the Palace from her estates at Lantañon where

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his parents acted as stewards—one of the hundred or so god-children of her uncle, Don Juan Manuel Montenegro, the eccentric and munificent lord of the ancient Lantañon Palace. I can see the child now as he first appeared at my door, deferentially removing his cap and asking meekly: "Have I the Señor's permission?"

He entered with head bent down, his white cloth cap clasped in both hands: "My mistress begs that you will command me."

"Where is your mistress?"

"In the garden."

He stood in the middle of the room, not daring to take a step. It is a memory that still brings a smile. Concha's favourite, unlike the pages of the old ballads, was neither blond nor melancholy, but his soft black eyes and romantic, sun-kissed cheeks might as easily have enticed the love of princesses.

I bade him open the windows and he ran to obey. A fresh perfumed breeze blew in from the garden and tossed the curtains gaily. The page had left his cap on a chair and picked it up again. I proceeded to question him.

"You are in service in the Palace?"

"Yes, señor."

"Have you been here long?"

"Nearly two years."

"And what do you do?"

"Well, I do everything I am told, señor."

"You have no parents?"

"Yes, señor, I have."

"What do they do?"

"Well, they do nothing. They dig the ground."

He gave his answers with the impassivity of an outcast. With his barbarous accent and rough garments, his timid eyes

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and hair clipped like a monk's, he might have been the child of an ancient bondman.

"Was it the Señorita who sent you to me?"

"Yes, señor. I was in the courtyard teaching the *riveirana* to the new blackbird—the old ones know it well already—when the Señorita came and sent me to you."

"So you are Master of Blackbirds here?"

"Yes, señor."

"A high responsibility."

"Yes, señor."

"And how old are you?"

"I think . . . I think I am . . ." The page kept his eyes upon his cap as he passed it slowly from one hand to the other, sunk in deep cogitation: "I think I am twelve; I am not sure."

"Where were you before you came to the Palace?"

"I served in the house of Don Juan Manuel."

"What did you do there?"

"There I trained ferrets."

"Another important charge!"

"Yes, señor."

"How many blackbirds does the Señorita own?"

The page looked disdainful: "Not a single one."

"Whose are they then?"

"They are mine. When I have them well trained I sell them."

"To whom do you sell them?"

"Why, to the Señorita. She buys them all from me. Can't you guess why she wants them?—to set them free. The Señorita likes to hear them singing in the garden, but they fly away. One Sunday, in the month of June, I was walking with the Señorita. Far beyond the meadows of Lantañon

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we saw a blackbird high up on a branch of a cherry-tree. He was singing the *riveirana*. I remember what the Señorita said: 'Just look where our caballero has flown to!'

This ingenuous tale made me laugh, and the page laughed too. Though he was neither blond nor melancholy he was born to be the page of a princess and the recorder of a kingdom's chronicles.

"Which has the higher importance," I asked, "the teaching of ferrets or the teaching of blackbirds?"

After a moment's meditation the page answered: "They are just alike."

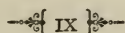
"Why did you leave the service of Don Juan Manuel?"

"Because he has many servants. Don Juan Manuel is a very great gentleman. All the servants in the Palace are afraid of him, I can tell you. Don Juan Manuel is my godfather; it was he who fetched me to the Palace to serve the Señorita."

"And which place do you find the better?"

The page fixed his childish black eyes upon me. With his cap clasped in his hands, he gravely formulated the remark: "To the humble in heart all places are good." A reply worthy of a Calderon.

This page also knew how to turn a phrase; his destiny could not be doubted. He was born to live in a palace, tame ferrets, teach blackbirds, tutor a prince and make a king.



Concha's mirthful voice called to me from the garden. I went out into the glass-walled loggia, warm and golden in the morning sunlight. The country had the feeling of the southland, yoked oxen, ripe vineyards, fecund fields. Concha

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was standing below me on the terrace: "Where is Florisel?"

"Is Florisel my page?"

"Yes."

"He must have been baptised by the fairies."

"I am his godmother. Call him for me."

"What do you want?"

"Tell him to come and carry up these roses." And Concha showed me her skirt brimming over with dew-wet roses, like the joyous fruitage of a perfect love brought to blossom with kisses.

"I have stripped the garden. They are all for you."

I had a vague remembrance of that ancient garden where immemorial myrtle clung to the four stone shields and crept around the forsaken fountain. Age had touched garden and Palace with the melancholy of places where, in other days, life has passed in scenes of gallantry and love. Beneath the green of the labyrinth, across the terraces and through the salons, laughter and madrigals had flowered; when the white hands in the old portraits on the walls, barely sustaining a little handkerchief of lace, sought the sweet secrets of the heart from the guileless petals of the marguerites. Beautiful memories of long ago! I too remembered days that were past, that sunlit autumn morning when the garden lay wet and freshly green from the constant rain of the night. Under the pure blue of the limpid sky, the venerable cypresses seemed wrapped in visions of monastic peace. The trembling light caressed the flowers like a golden bird, and the breeze traced fantastic footprints on the velvet grass as if unseen fairies were dancing there. Concha stood at the foot of the stairs arranging a huge bunch of roses. Some of them had dropped their petals in her skirt; smiling, she showed them to

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me: "See, what a pity!" And she buried her pale cheeks in the velvety freshness. "Oh, how sweet."

"Perfume divine! Essence of yourself!" I said, smiling.

With closed eyes she drew a blissful breath. When she raised her head her face was wet with dew like another rose, a pure white rose. Against the background of soft, dark green, with the sunlight wrapping her in draperies of diaphanous gold, she might have been the madonna in the dreams of some Franciscan monk. As I came down the steps to join her she greeted me with a shower of petals from her skirt. We strolled about the garden together. The paths were covered with dry, yellowed leaves which the wind swept before us with a long-drawn rustle. Snails, motionless as old paralytics, sunned themselves on the stone benches. The flowers in the fretted myrtle-bordered baskets were beginning to fade. They filled the air with an intangible sweetness that held the melancholy of remembrance. In the heart of the labyrinth the fountain murmured amid the cypress trees. The soft crooning of the water seemed to have lulled the garden into the peaceful sleep of age: serene, abstracted, forsaken.

"Let us rest here," Concha said.

We sat down in the shade of the acacias on a stone bench covered with dead leaves. The gateway to the green mysterious labyrinth opened before us; the two carved monsters, embellishing its arch, were stained with moss. A path—a single dark path—wound through the myrtle like a solitary life, silent, unknown.

Florisel passed between the trees in the distance carrying a cage for his blackbirds. Concha pointed: "There he goes."

"Who?"

"Florisel."

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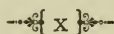
“Why do you call him Florisel?”

She answered with a light laugh: “Florisel is the page in the fairy-tale with whom the disconsolate princess falls in love.”

“Who was the author of that fairy-tale?”

“Ah, nobody will ever know who wrote the fairy-tales.”

Her eyes darkened mysteriously as she gazed into the distance and her laugh sounded so strange to me that I felt chilled—the chill of an understanding of life’s perversities. It seemed to me that Concha shivered too. The truth is, it was late October and the sun was beginning to cloud over. We returned to the Palace.



The Brandeso Palace, although built in the eighteenth century, is almost pure plateresque in style—an Italian palace with balconies and fountains and gardens, built by the Bishop of Corinto, Don Pedro de Bendaña, Knight of the Order of Santiago, Comisario de Cruzada and Confessor to the Queen, Maria Amelia of Parma. I believe that my ancestor, Marshal Bendaña, and one of Concha’s ancestors, had some litigation over the inheritance of the Palace. I am not certain, because this ancestor of mine engaged in litigation over everything, even over the Crown itself. The history of the noble house of Bendaña is the history of the Court of Chancery of Valladolid, and in consequence I inherited quite a fortune in legal documents.

Since Concha cherished the cult of memories, she was eager to have me go over the Palace with her and recall the days when I used to visit there with my mother; when she and her sisters were pale little girls who came and kissed me and took me by the hand to play with them. Sometimes we

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played in the tower, sometimes on the terrace or in the glass-walled loggia that looked on the road and the garden. As we went up the ruined stairs that morning, doves took wing and came to light above the stone escutcheons. The sun threw a blaze of gold against the window-panes; ageless gilly-flowers bloomed in the cracks of the wall; a lizard crawled on the balustrade. Concha smiled languidly: "Do you remember?"

And that faint smile magically brought back all the past, as the pervasive fragrance of fading flowers will bring vague but happy memories. . . . Here it was that a pious, sorrowful lady used to relate to us the histories of the saints. How many times she had sat in the window-corner showing me the pictures in the *Año Cristiano*, open in her lap. I can still remember the ethereal hands as they slowly turned the pages. The lady had a beautiful and ancient name; she was called Agueda. She was the mother of Fernandina, Isabel and Concha, the three pale little girls with whom I used to play. After many years I visited again the formal salons and familiar rooms; silent white rooms, walnut-floored, which preserved throughout the year the smell of the autumn apples placed to ripen above the windows; the salons, draped in antique damask, with clouded mirrors and old portraits—ladies in wide petticoats, stern soldiers, pale abbesses, and prelates with pedantic smiles. Our footsteps resounded through the rooms as through deserted churches. In one room only, where the carpeting was cork, our footsteps made no sound; they were quiet as the tread of phantoms with never an echo. The doors swung slowly open on their ornate iron hinges to emit, from the silent obscurity beyond, a far-away perfume of other lives. Seen in the mirrors, as if reflected in an enchanted lake, the salons seemed to stretch on and on into a dreamland where the people of the portraits,

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early bishops, mournful maidens, and dark-skinned primogenitors seemed to live forgotten, in secular tranquillity.

Concha stopped where two corridors opened into a huge dismantled ante-chamber furnished with ancient chests. A faint circle of light came from the small oil lamp that burned day and night before a Christ of livid flesh and dishevelled hair.

"Do you remember this ante-chamber?" Concha asked in a low tone.

"Yes. The circular ante-chamber?"

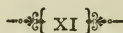
"Yes—where we used to play."

An old woman sat spinning in a window-corner. Concha drew my attention with a gesture.

"Micæla, my mother's maid. Poor thing, she is blind. Say nothing."

We passed on. Sometimes Concha stopped at the threshold of a door and, pointing to the silent room beyond, asked, with an evanescent smile that seemed itself to vanish into the past: "Do you remember?"

She recalled things farthest away in time. She remembered us, as children, jumping up and down in front of the console tables to see the rose-filled vases shake and the lamps with their branching ornaments—the days when our wild, young laughter shook the lofty abstraction of the Palace, as it trilled through the big bright ante-chambers and floated down dark corridors and out through the slitted windows where the white doves were cooing.



Toward nightfall Concha felt so cold that she was forced to go to bed. Alarmed at the way she trembled and at her deathlike pallor, I wanted to send to Viana del Prior for a

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doctor, but she opposed it and at the end of an hour she looked at me with a languid smile of love. Lying motionless on the white pillows, she said softly: "Do you know that now it seems a happiness to be ill?"

"Why?"

"Because you are taking care of me."

I smiled without speaking.

"You don't know how much I love you," she sweetly insisted.

In the dusk of the bedroom Concha's subdued voice had a deeply sensuous charm. My soul felt the contagion.

"I love you even more, Princess."

"No, no. . . . In times gone by I knew I appealed strongly to your senses; for however innocent a woman may be, she always recognises that, and you remember how innocent I was."

I leaned over and kissed her eyes which were veiled with tears.

"Will you believe it, I don't remember that, Concha," I said to divert her.

She laughed and exclaimed: "What a cynic you are."

"Say, rather, what a bad memory I have. It was so long ago!"

"How long was it? Let me see."

"Don't make me sad remembering the years."

"Well, confess anyway that I was very innocent."

"As innocent as a married woman can be."

"More so, much more so! Ah! you were completely my master."

She breathed the last words as if they were sighs and pressed one of her hands to her eyes. As I watched her I felt voluptuous memories exciting my senses. All the fas-

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cination that Concha held for me in other days existed still, purified by her frailness and her pallor. It was true that I had been completely her master. Wedded as a child and to an old man, she was as guilelessly inexperienced as a virgin. For there are bridal beds as cold as sepulchres and bridegrooms who lie like statues of granite. Poor Concha! Close to her lips, perfumed by prayers, my lips had been the first to sing love's triumphs and its glorious exaltations. I must needs teach her the whole book of verse; line by line, the two-and-thirty sonnets of Pietro Aretino. That white, unfolding flower, a child though married, could scarcely murmur the first word. There are husbands and there are lovers who are useless to serve us even as forerunners—though, God knows, the dark, red rose of evil is a flower that never blossomed in love of mine. I have ever preferred to be the Marquis de Bradomín rather than that supreme disciple of perversity, the Marquis de Sade. That alone may explain why some women have found me disdainful; but Concha was never one of these.

Because we had fallen into silence she asked: "Of what are you thinking?"

"Of the past, Concha."

"I am jealous of it."

"Don't be silly! It was of our love of long ago."

She smiled and closed her eyes as if she too were evoking memories. Then she murmured, with a kind of sweet resignation, perfumed with love and melancholy: "I have begged just one thing from the Virgin of the Conception and I believe she will grant it to me . . . in the hour of my death, to have you near me."

We fell once more into a sad silence. After a time Concha raised herself on the pillows; her eyes were full of tears.

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"Xavier," she said in a very low voice, "give me the jewel-box on the dressing-table. Open it. I keep your letters with my jewels. . . . We will burn them together. . . . I don't wish them to live after me."

The silver casket, engraved with the decadent sumptuousness of the eighteenth century, exhaled a soft perfume of violets. I breathed it in with closed eyes.

"Have you no letters but mine?"

"None."

"Ah! Your new love does not know how to write."

"My new love? Who is my new love? You have been thinking some atrocity!"

"I believe it."

"What?"

"I won't tell you."

"Suppose I guess."

"You can't guess."

"What enormity have you thought of?"

"Florisel!" I exclaimed, laughing.

A shadow of annoyance passed over Concha's eyes: "Were you capable of thinking such a thing!" She buried her hands in my hair, rumpling it over my head: "What shall I do to you? Kill you?"

I laughed, and she laughed too. Her voice was fresh, sensuous, happy. "It's impossible that you should have thought that."

"Say, rather, it seems impossible."

"But you did think it?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you. How could you even imagine it?"

"I remembered my own first conquest. I was only eleven

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years old when a lady fell in love with me. She was a very beautiful lady, too."

"My Aunt Augusta," Concha murmured in a low voice.

"Yes."

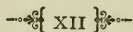
"You told me of that before. But were you not more beautiful than Florisel?"

I hesitated an instant. I believe my lips were about to stain themselves with a lie, but I finally had the courage to confess the truth: "No, Concha, I was less beautiful."

She gave me a mocking glance and closed the jewel-case. "We will burn your letters some other day—not to-day. Your jealousy has put me in a good humour."

And throwing herself on the pillow she broke into peals of happy laughter.

The day for us to burn the letters never arrived. I have always shrunk from burning love-letters. I adore them as poets adore their verses. When Concha died they were inherited by her daughters together with the jewels in the silver casket.



Souls that are sick and in love are perhaps more prone than others to dream dreams and weave illusions. I had never seen Concha so gay or so happy. This rebirth of our love was like an afternoon of golden clouds in a soft and melancholy autumn, an afternoon and clouds such as I gazed upon from the glass-walled loggia as Concha with romantic weariness leaned upon my shoulder. Beneath the rays of the dying sun the road wound luminous and solitary through the moist green country. Concha's eyes were lost in the distance; she raised a pale hand and pointed to the far-off cypresses of the cemetery.

"That is the road we both must travel," Concha sighed.

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Poor Concha talked much of dying but without believing in it.

"Concha, don't sadden me," I mocked. "I am a prince, you know, that you are holding in your palace under enchantment. If you want the enchantment not to be broken you must make a happy ending for the tale."

Concha smiled, forgetting her twilight sorrows. "It is the road, too, by which you came," she said.

Concha made an effort to seem gay. She had learned that all tears are bitter and that sighs, be they ever so soft and sweet, must last but a breath and be gone. Poor Concha, white and pale as the branching lilies that fill the chapel with a rarer perfume as they fade!

Again she raised her hand, diaphanous as a spirit's, and pointed to the distance: "Do you see a man on horseback over there?"

"No."

"He is passing La Fontela now."

"Oh, yes, I see him."

"It is my uncle, Don Juan Manuel."

"The magnificent hidalgo of Lantañon!"

Concha's look was full of pity. "Poor man. He is coming to see you, I am sure."

Don Juan Manuel halted in the middle of the road, stood up in the stirrups and swept off his wide hat to us. His powerful voice shouted out: "Cousin, cousin! Send a servant to open the garden gate."

An echo in the distance repeated: "Gate."

Concha motioned with her arms that she had already done so; then, laughing, she turned to me: "You tell him they are coming."

Shaping my hands to carry the sound, I shouted: "Coming!"

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Don Juan Manuel pretended not to hear me. The privilege of making oneself heard at such a distance belonged exclusively to him. Concha covered her ears: "Stop! Stop! For he will never admit he hears you."

I continued to call: "Coming! Coming!" To no purpose. Don Juan Manuel leaned over and patted his horse's neck. He had made up his mind not to hear me. He stood in the stirrups again: "Cousin, cousin!"

Concha leaned against the window laughing merrily like a child while the old man continued to shout: "Cousin, cousin!"

"Isn't he magnificent!"

Magnificent in sooth was Don Juan Manuel Montenegro. It evidently seemed to him that the gate was not opened with the requisite dispatch. He jabbed his horse with the spurs and galloped off, turning to shout from the distance: "Can't wait. Must go to Viana del Prior. Have to thrash the notary."

Florisel, running to open the gate, stopped to watch how gallantly he rode away, then turned and retraced his steps up the ancient ivy-covered stairs. As he passed in front of us he observed in a heavily solemn tone, without lifting his eyes: "A grand Señor, a very grand Señor is Don Juan Manuel!"

I think it was a reproof, for we were still laughing at the old hidalgo.

"Wait, Florisel!" I called.

He stood trembling. "What are the Señor's orders?"

"Does Don Juan Manuel seem to you a very grand Señor?"

"Even more grand than he who hears me now." And he fixed his childlike eyes on Concha, begging forgiveness. Concha absolved her favourite with the air of an indulgent

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queen; then spoiled it by a wild burst of laughter. The page went silently away. We kissed each other joyously, and before our lips were separated we heard, far off, the song of the blackbirds, led by Florisel's flute of reeds.

—❧ XIII ❧—

It was a moonlight night. Deep in the labyrinth the fountain sang like a hidden bird. We were silent, with hands enlaced. Presently, weary footsteps sounded along the corridor. Candelaria entered with a lighted lamp. Concha cried out as if waking from a dream: "Oh! . . . take that light away!"

"You are not going to sit in the dark? You know, there is danger in the moonlight."

"What danger, Candelaria?"

The old woman lowered her voice: "The Señorita knows—witches!"

Candelaria went away with the lamp, crossing herself repeatedly. We turned again and listened to the fountain's song of complaint, as she told the moon of her dark prison in the labyrinth. The ancient cuckoo-clock, which had marked the ancestral hours for generations, struck seven.

"How early it gets dark! Only seven!"

"Winter is almost here."

"When do you have to leave me?"

"I? When you tell me to go."

"Ah! When I tell you to go!" sighed Concha. "That I shall never do."

She silently pressed my hand. We were sitting in the loggia. The garden lay before us bright in the moonlight. The weathered cypresses, crowned with stars, were silhouetted

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against a churchly blue, and from the black fountain came the gleam of silver water. Concha spoke.

"I received a letter yesterday. I shall have to show it to you."

"A letter from whom?"

"From your cousin Isabel. She is coming with the children."

"Isabel Bendaña?"

"Yes."

"But has Isabel children?"

"No," Concha murmured timidly. "My children."

Something like an April breeze passed over the garden of my memories. Concha's two little daughters had been fond of me in times gone by, and I had loved them too. I raised my eyes to look at their mother, and I never remember so sad a smile on Concha's lips.

"What is it? What is the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Are the children with their father?"

"No. I am having them educated in the Convent of the Enseñanza."

"They must be almost women now."

"Yes. They are big girls."

"They used to be lovely. Are they now?"

"Like their mother."

"Ah, no. Never like their mother."

Concha's lips curved to their accustomed mournful smile. She sat pensively looking at her hands: "I have a favour to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"We must play a little comedy when Isabel comes with the children. I shall tell them that you are at Lantañon hunting

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with my uncle. Some afternoon you will come and, either because there is a storm or because we are afraid of robbers or something, you will stay on at the Palace as our protector."

"How many days must my exile endure?"

"Not one . . ." Concha answered eagerly. "The very afternoon they come. . . . You are not offended . . . really?"

"No, my life."

"You make me very happy. I have been worrying over it since yesterday, not daring to tell you."

"Do you think Isabel will be deceived?"

"I am not doing it for Isabel. I am doing it for the children; they are almost women now."

"And Don Juan Manuel?"

"I will tell him. He has no scruples—another descendant of the Borgias. Your own uncle, is he not?"

"I don't know—perhaps the relationship is through you."

"I think not," she answered laughing. "I have an idea that your mother called him cousin."

"Oh! My mother could tell us the history of all the branches of the family, but for the present we shall have to consult Florisel."

"He shall be our king-at-arms," Concha replied, and a smile trembled on the flower-like lips. She crossed her hands in her lap and gazed pensively into the garden.

Florisel's charges, hanging in a cage of reeds in the doorway, were singing an ancient *riveirana*; the lively rustic rhythm evoked a memory of gay, Celtic dances beneath the ancient oaks. Concha began to sing, too. Her voice was as soft as a caress. She got up and walked idly about the loggia. White in the moonlight against the dark shadows of the room, she began to dance the graceful steps of an idyllic

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pastoral. She stopped soon and sighed: "Ah! How tired I get! I have learned the *riveirana*, you see."

"Are you too a pupil of Florisel?" I answered laughing.

"Yes."

I went over and put my arms around her. She crossed her hands on my shoulder and, leaning her cheek upon them, looked up at me with beautiful sick eyes. We kissed, and her frail lips devoured mine.

---XIV---

Poor Concha, so wasted, so pale, had for pleasure the sublime endurance of a goddess. That night the flame of passion, now dying down, now raging, long enwrapped us with its golden tongue. As the birds began their choral in the garden I fell asleep in Concha's arms. When I waked she was sitting up against the pillows with an expression of such intense suffering that a chill went through me. Poor Concha! Seeing that my eyes were open she managed to smile.

"What is it, dear?" I asked, caressing her hands.

"I don't know. I think I am very ill."

"But what is it?"

"I don't know. . . . What a shameful thing it would be if they found me here dead."

Her words kindled in me the desire to keep her close to me, and I seized her in my arms.

"Poor love, you are trembling."

She turned down her eyes with the sweet droop that meant she wanted me to kiss the lids. She still trembled; with ardent lips I tried to warm her entire body. My mouth jealously travelled the arms to the shoulder and placed a collar of roses around her neck. I raised my eyes to look at her. She was

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holding her pale hands crossed in front of her, contemplating them mournfully. Poor hands, so frail, so bloodless, almost ethereal.

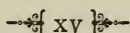
"The hands of the Dolorosa," I whispered.

She smiled: "The hands of a corpse."

"To me they are most beautiful when they are whitest."

A happy light came into her eyes: "Ah, yes, I still please you very much. I can still make you feel."

She threw an arm about my neck and with one hand lifted her breasts to me, roses of snow consumed by fever. I clasped her passionately, my desire heightened by the biting terror that I might see her die. I heard her sigh and thought it was the breath of death. Trembling, I placed a kiss as if administering the sacrament. With an aching voluptuousness never felt before my soul floated off on the perfume of that wasting flower whose beauty my impious fingers reverently profaned. I saw her eyes open, filled with amorous light. But nevertheless I divined that she was suffering intensely. The following day Concha was unable to rise from her bed.



Late in the afternoon there was a heavy shower. I had taken refuge in the library and was reading the "Florilegio de Nuestra Señora," a book of sermons compiled by the founder of the Palace, Don Pedro de Bendaña, Bishop of Corinto. At times I was distracted by the roar of the wind in the garden, the swish of dead leaves whirling along the paths of age-old myrtle and the tapping of bare branches on the leaded window-panes. Within the library there reigned a monasterial peace, a sleep canonical and doctoral. One felt in the atmosphere the breath of the ancient parchment-bound

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folios—studies of theology, books on linguistics—in which the Bishop used to delve.

All at once I heard a powerful voice in the corridor calling: “Marquis! Marquis de Bradomín . . . !”

I turned the “Florilegio” over on the table to keep the page and stood up. The door opened and Don Juan Manuel appeared on the threshold, shaking the rain from his cloak in a shower of drops.

“A bad day, nephew.”

“Very bad, uncle.” And our relationship was sealed.

“Shut up in here, reading? . . . Nephew, it’s the worst thing in the world for your eyes.”

He went up to the fire and stretched his hands to the flame: “There is snow falling.”

He turned his back to the fire and puffed himself up proudly in front of me. From the depths of his collar his grandiloquent voice boomed out: “Nephew, I see you have inherited your grandfather’s mania for reading. He too spent his time poring over books . . . and lost his wits as a result. What learned tome is this?”

His deep-sunk eyes, greenish in hue, directed a glance filled with scorn at the “Florilegio de Nuestra Señora.” He left the fire and paced up and down the library with resounding spurs. Suddenly he stopped: “Marquis de Bradomín, is there no more of the Blood of Christ in the Brandeso Palace?”

I understood what he wanted and rose. With a haughty expression Don Juan Manuel extended a detaining arm.

“Do not move. Are there no servants in the Palace?”

From where he stood he began to shout lustily: “Arnelas! Bríon! . . . One of you! Come at once!”

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He was rapidly losing patience when Florisel appeared at the door: "Your command, master?"

Advancing, he kissed the hand of the old *hidalgo* who patted the boy on the head: "Bring up the red wine of La Fontela." And Don Juan Manuel turned to pace the library once more.

From time to time he stopped before the fire and extended his hands, white, noble and fleshless as the hands of an ascetic king. Although the years had whitened his hair completely he preserved the erect, arrogant carriage of his prime when, in the Noble Guard, he had served His Majesty the King. It was many years now since he had retired to his estates of Lantañon, where he passed his days in the usual pursuits of the noble landowner—trading at the fairs, gaming in the villages and sitting at table with the parish priest on feast-days. Since Concha had come to live in retirement in the Brandeso Palace, it was a frequent occurrence for him to appear there. He would tie his horse at the garden gate and enter, shouting at the top of his voice. He would call for wine and drink till he fell asleep in his chair. When he awoke, whether it was night or day, he would call for his horse and ride off to his Palace, swaying wildly in the saddle.

Don Juan Manuel had a great predilection for the red wine of La Fontela which was kept in an ancient cask dating from the time of the French. Growing impatient at the servant's delay in coming up from the wine-cellar, he stopped in the middle of the library: "The wine! The wine! . . . But perhaps they are gathering the grapes."

Florisel appeared, all of a tremble, with a large jug which he set upon the table. Don Juan Manuel divested himself of his raincoat and sat down in a big armchair.

"Marquis de Bradomín, I assure you that this wine of

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La Fontela is the best in the district. You know the wine of Condado? This is better. If it were made of selected grapes it would be the best in the world."

So saying, he filled his glass, one of those massive antique drinking vessels, with a handle, that recall the refectory of a monastery. It was of crystal, engraved on the bottom with the cross of the Order of Calatrava. Quietly and deeply, Don Juan Manuel drank, draining the wine at a single draught and filling his glass again.

"If my niece Concha had drunk more wine like this she would not be as she is to-day."

As he spoke, Concha came through the doorway, trailing her nun-like draperies and smiling at me: "My uncle, Don Juan Manuel, would like to have you go back with him to his Palace. Has he told you? To-morrow is a day of festival in one of his villages, San Rosendo de Lantañon. My uncle tells me that you will be received with the honours accorded to a prince of the Church."

Don Juan Manuel assented haughtily.

"You must know that, for three centuries, it has been the privilege of the Marquises de Bradomin to be so honoured in the parishes of San Rosendo de Lantañon, Santa Baya de Cristamilde and San Miguel de Deiro. The three benefices were gifts of your house. Am I not right, nephew?"

"Quite right, uncle."

"Oh, you needn't ask him," Concha interrupted, laughing. "Sad though it be, the last Marquis de Bradomin knows not one word of these things."

Don Juan Manuel gravely shook his head. "He knows that. He must know it."

Concha dropped into the chair that I had occupied a moment before and opened the "Florilegio de Nuestra Señora" with

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a learned air: "I am positive that he doesn't even know the origin of the house of Bradomín."

Don Juan Manuel turned to me, nobly conciliatory: "Pay no heed to your cousin. She is mocking you."

Concha insisted: "Why he hardly knows how the coat-of-arms of the house of Montenegro is composed."

Don Manuel twisted his rugged white brows into a frown. "The merest child knows that."

With a smile of delicate irony Concha murmured: "It being the most illustrious of Spanish houses."

"Spanish and German too, my child. We Montenegros of Galicia are descended from an Empress of Germany. It is the only Spanish escutcheon which wears metal upon metal—spurs of gold upon a silver field. The line of Bradomín is very ancient, too. But among the many titles of your house—Marquisate of Bradomín—Marquisate of San Miguel—Earldom of Barbazón—Señorio of Padín—the most ancient and the most illustrious is the Señorio. It dates back to Don Roldán, one of the twelve Peers of the Realm. You know, Don Roldán did not, as history states, die in Roncesvalles."

I knew nothing, but Concha assented with a nod. Doubtless she had been made acquainted with this family secret. Don Juan Manuel, after draining another glass, continued: "I, like you, am a descendant of Don Roldán; consequently, I know the facts very well. Don Roldán managed to escape in a ship and reached the Island of Salvora. There he was lured by a siren and was shipwrecked upon the coast. He had a son by the siren who, being born of Don Roldán, was called Padín—which afterwards became Paladin. That is why a siren clasps your shield in the Church of Lantañon."

He rose, walked to the window and looked through the leaded panes to see if the weather was clearing. The sun was

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barely visible through the clouds. Don Juan Manuel stood for a moment studying the sky. Then he turned toward us: "I shall now go to my mills, not far from here; I will return for you. . . . Since you have this mania for reading, nephew, I will give you an old volume at the Palace, with big clear type, where all this history is related at length."

Don Juan Manuel emptied his glass and stalked from the library with clanking spurs. When the echo of his footsteps was lost down the long corridor, Concha, leaning on her chair, got up and, white as a phantom, came toward me.



In the depths of the labyrinth the fountain sang like a hidden bird; the air was warm and sweet. The setting sun gilded the panes of the loggia where we waited; delicate arches of stained glass formed the walls, the workmanship of the *grand siècle* which invented the pavan and the gavotte. In each arch the panes formed a triptych through which the garden could be seen in a tempest, in snow or in rain. That afternoon the October sun penetrated to the centre of the room like the weary spear of a warrior of old.

Concha was standing motionless in the arch of the doorway looking out toward the road while doves circled above her head. Concha was vexed because I had heard with a smile her account of a celestial apparition accorded her as she slept in my arms. It was such a dream as might have come to one of the saints in those stories told me as a child by the devout and melancholy lady of the Palace. I recall the dream vaguely. . . . Concha was lost in the labyrinth. Seated at the foot of the fountain she wept disconsolately. Upon this, an angel appeared before her; he wore neither shield nor

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sword; he was pure and sorrowful as a lily. Concha understood that the angel was not come to contend with Satan. She smiled up at him through her tears and the Archangel, stretching above her his wings of light, guided her. . . . The labyrinth was the sin in which Concha was lost: the water of the fountain, the tears she must weep in purgatory—for, in spite of our guilty love, Concha would not condemn herself to an eternal punishment. The angel guided her through still green myrtles to the arched gate where the two stone monsters faced each other. There he moved his wings as if to fly upward. Concha, on her knees, asked him if she should atone by entering a convent. The Archangel made no response. Concha, wringing her hands, asked if she should destroy the flower of our love and cast it to the winds. The Archangel made no response. Concha, dragging herself along the stones, asked if she were about to die. Again the Archangel made no response but Concha felt two tears fall upon her hand and roll like diamonds between her fingers. Then Concha had understood the mysterious significance of the dream. . . . When she had finished she sighed: "It is a notification from heaven, Xavier."

"Dreams are no more than dreams, Concha."

"I am going to die! . . . Have you no faith in visions?"

I smiled sceptically, for at that time I did not believe in them.

Concha moved slowly toward the door. The doves circling above her seemed a happy augury. The moist green landscape smiled in the peace of afternoon. The scattered houses of the village and distant windmills stretched away beneath the trellised vines about the doorway to the blue mountains beyond, with the first snow of autumn on their peaks. The sun came blithely out between the showers. Village folk

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moved up and down the road; a shepherdess with a shawl of scarlet cloth about her shoulders was guiding her flock toward the Church of San Gundián; women came from the spring singing; a weary old man urged his cows as they stopped to nibble in a field; white mist seemed to rise between the fig-trees. . . .

Don Juan Manuel appeared on the summit of the hill, splendidly magnificent, his rain-cloak floating to the breeze. The major-domo stood at the foot of the stairs holding the reins of a thoughtful old white horse with a long venerable mane. The ancient nag was as grave and prudent-looking as an archbishop and had belonged to the Palace since time immemorial. He neighed in a truly noble manner and Concha, hearing it, dried the tears that were making her eyes more lovely.

“You will come back to-morrow, Xavier?”

“Yes.”

“You promise me?”

“Yes.”

“You are not going away vexed with me?”

“I am not going away vexed with you, Concha,” I answered, with a lightly mocking smile.

We kissed with the romantic kiss of the times. I was the crusader departing for Jerusalem, and Concha the lady of the castle weeping in the moonlight. I confess that in the days when I wore Merovingian locks flowing on my shoulders, *à la* Espronceda and Zorrilla, I knew no other manner of leavetaking. To-day, the years have imposed upon me the tonsure of an acolyte, which permits me only to murmur a sad good-bye. Happy time, the time of youth! Yet who would be like the fountain in the labyrinth, ageless, soulless, laughing forever its crystal laughter?

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—{ XVII }—

From the glass-walled loggia Concha waved good-bye with her white hand. The sun was low and the moon's slim crescent just appearing in a sad autumnal sky. The Lantañon Palace was two leagues distant; a stony road that held great pools of water before which our Rosinantes hesitated, moving timorous ears. On the other side some peasant boy, quietly waiting while his oxen drank, would stand and watch us in silence. Shepherds driving their flocks back from the mountain halted at the turn of the road and herded their charges aside to let us pass. Don Juan Manuel went first. I could see him sway continually on his horse which seemed restless and unaccustomed to the saddle. It was a small mountain-bred dapple-grey with a wild eye and a hard mouth. It seemed his master had inflicted upon him a docked mane and tail as a chastisement for bad behaviour. Don Juan Manuel used little judgment in managing him. He would punish him with the spurs and pull on the reins at the same time, which made the horse rear violently. It never managed to unseat the rider, however, for at such moments the old hidalgo displayed great skill. When he had gone about halfway, complete darkness came upon us. Although Don Juan Manuel swayed continually in his saddle, this did not prevent him from raising a powerful voice to warn me of the bad spots in the road. We came to a fork where three roads met. Some women, kneeling in prayer at a wayside shrine, rose to their feet as we approached. Don Juan Manuel's horse took fright, shied violently and threw his rider. The horse broke away through the screaming women and bolted off at a gallop, dragging the body of Don Juan Manuel, held fast by a foot in the stirrup. I could hear the dull swish of the body as it struck against the

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thorns that lined the road. In the blackness I saw sparks fly from the horse's hoofs as it dashed down the stony grade descending to the river. After a time I managed to ride ahead and turn my horse across the road. The runaway stopped, flanks quivering and covered with sweat. I jumped to the ground. Don Juan Manuel's body was a mass of blood and mire. As I bent over him he slowly opened his eyes. In pain and bewilderment he closed them again without uttering a complaint. I realised that he had fainted. Lifting him from the ground I laid him across my horse and started back. As we approached the Palace I was obliged to dismount; the body was slipping and I had to place it more securely across the saddle. The coldness of the lifeless hanging hands frightened me. My horse neighed as I took up the bridle again. We drew near the Palace. Through the darkness I made out three men mounted on mules coming through the garden gate to the road. I questioned them from a distance: "Are you hired mounts?"

"Yes, señor," the three responded in chorus.

"Whom did you bring to the Palace?"

"A lady and two little girls. They arrived this afternoon on the boat from Flavia-Longa."

The three reined their mules to the edge of the road to make way for us. When they saw Don Juan Manuel's body lying across my saddle they muttered together in low tones but did not dare to question me. They undoubtedly thought that I had committed a murder, and I could swear that the three yokels were trembling as they sat their mules.

I dismounted in the middle of the road and ordered one of them to get down and hold my horse while I broke the news at the Palace. The youth jumped off without a word. As he took the reins he recognised Don Juan Manuel: "By Our

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Lady of Brandeso! His Excellency, Don Juan Manuel of Lantañon!"

Holding the bridle with a trembling hand, he asked in a low respectful tone: "An accident, Señor Marquis?"

"A fall from his horse."

"He seems to be dead."

"Yes, he does seem so."

At that moment Don Juan Manuel painfully raised himself from the saddle: "Only half dead, cousin," he said with a groan that he courageously changed to a sigh.

He directed a questioning glance at the yokels and then turned to me: "What men are these?"

"The hirelings that came with Isabel and the children."

"Where are we then?"

"Back at the Palace."

I took up the bridle and entered the ancient avenue. The yokels took leave of us: "Good night. A safe journey to you."

Don Juan Manuel turned, groaning, and raised himself with a hand on either side of the saddle. He called after them into the distance, his voice as arrogant as ever: "If you find my horse, take it to Viana del Prior. El Berbes will keep him for me."

At the words of the old hidalgo a voice lost in the silence of the night came faintly back on the breeze: "It will be done, Señor Padrino."

In the familiar darkness of the chestnut avenue my horse, scenting the stable, neighed again. Ahead of us, close to the Palace, two servants passed talking together in rustic accents. The first one carried a lantern which swung slowly and measuredly as he walked. The smoky oil flame came through the damp-obscured glass with a flickering light that fell upon

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the wet ground and the wooden shoes of the peasants. They stopped in front of the stairs a moment talking together in low tones. When they saw us they came forward holding the lantern high to throw the light far along the road. They were sheep-tenders who had just been distributing the nightly portion of fresh grass among the stalls. They came up, stupidly frightened, and by the light of the lantern, which they fastened to the balustrade of the staircase, deferentially lowered Don Juan Manuel from the saddle. The old hidalgo walked up the stairs leaning on the servants' shoulders. I went ahead to break the news to Concha. Poor child, she was so good that she seemed always awaiting a fitting occasion to be frightened.

—❧ XVIII ❧—

I found Concha in the morning-room with her daughters, amusing herself in combing the long golden curls of the younger child. The other one was seated beside her mother on the Louis XV sofa. The two children resembled one another closely; blonde with the colour of gold in their eyes, like two young princesses in Titian's later manner. The elder was named Maria Fernanda and the younger Maria Isabel. They both talked at once, recounting the tale of their journey, while their mother listened, enchanted and happy, her pale fingers lost in the child's golden hair. When I entered she started slightly but controlled herself. The children gazed wide-eyed at me as their mother exclaimed in a voice which trembled a little: "How nice! Did you come from Lantañon? You must have known the children were here."

"I heard of it in the Palace. It is to Don Juan Manuel

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that I am indebted for the pleasure of seeing you. He fell from his horse going down the Brandeso Hill."

The children questioned their mother: "Is that our uncle from Lantañon?"

"Yes, children."

Leaving the ivory comb imprisoned in the child's curls, Concha drew a pale hand from among the threads of gold and silently extended it to me. The children's innocent eyes never moved from us.

"Merciful heaven!" their mother murmured. "A fall at his age? Where were you coming from?"

"From Viana del Prior."

"How was it that you did not meet Isabel and the children on the road?"

"We took the short-cut over the mountain."

Concha looked away, so as not to laugh, and went on combing her daughter's curls, the waving, golden mass of a Venetian matron spread over the shoulders of a child. Isabel came in soon afterwards. "I knew that you were here, cousin," she said.

"How did you know?"

"Because I have seen my Uncle Don Juan Manuel. It was really a miracle that he wasn't killed."

Concha stood up, a child on either side smilingly supporting her, as if it were a game. "Poor man! Let's go and see him, little ones."

"Wait until to-morrow, Concha," I said.

Isabel went over and made her sit down: "It is better for him that he should rest. We have just bound him up in wet vinegar cloths and Candelaria and Florisel have put him to bed."

We all sat down. Concha told the elder child to call Can-

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delaria. The little girl was running to the door when her mother stopped her: "Where are you going, Maria Fernanda?"

"I thought you told me . . .?"

"Yes, my child, but it is enough to touch the gong by the dressing-table."

Maria Fernanda flitted shyly over to obey. Her mother kissed her tenderly, then, smiling, kissed the little one who was gazing at her mother with big topaz eyes. Candelaria entered pulling threads for lint from a square of white linen.

"Did you ring?"

Maria Fernanda stepped forward: "I rang, Candela. Mamma told me to."

The child ran to the old servant and, taking the kerchief from her hands, began to pull the threads. Maria Isabel, seated upon the floor with her cheek against her mother's knee, lifted her head coaxingly: "Give it to me, Candela. I want to pull the threads."

"Another came first, my dove." And Candelaria, with the loyal smile of an old family servant, showed her wrinkled hands empty. Maria Fernanda sat down again upon the sofa. My cousin Isabel, who had a partiality for the little one, took the sweet white linen and tore it in two: "Here, darling, take this."

After a moment, Maria Fernanda, placing thread after thread on her lap, exclaimed with the gravity of a grandmother: "There's a spoiled child for you!"

Candelaria awaited orders in the middle of the room, her hands crossed over her starched, fluted apron. Concha questioned her about Don Juan Manuel: "Have you left him alone?"

"Yes, Señorita. He is asleep."

"In which room did you put him?"

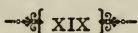
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"In the garden-room."

"You will prepare a room for the Señor Marquis also. . . . It would never do to allow him to go back to Lantañon alone."

And Concha turned on me her lovely, delicate smile. The old nurse's wrinkled forehead took on a tinge of red. She looked at the children with tenderness; then, with the stark severity of a duenna: "The Bishop's apartments are prepared for the Señor Marquis." And she silently withdrew.

The children applied themselves diligently to fraying the linen, with now and then a furtive glance to see which was getting on the faster. Concha and Isabel talked impenetrable secrets together in undertones. A clock struck ten. In the children's laps the linen threads grew slowly into snowy nose-gays.



I sat down by the fire and entertained myself moving the logs about with the antique tongs of bronze, lavishly ornamented in the traditional manner. The two children had fallen asleep; the elder with her head on her mother's shoulder, the younger in my cousin Isabel's arms. Outside, the rain beat against the window-panes, and the wind passed in gusts over the dark, mysterious garden. The embers on the hearth shone like rubies; from time to time a gay flame ran lightly over them. Concha and Isabel continued to talk in low voices so as not to waken the children. Seeing each other after such a long time, they turned their eyes to the past, endlessly recalling things that happened long ago; a lengthy whispered exposition of distant relationships long since forgotten; of pious delicate old aunts and pale cousins who pined for lovers; of the unfortunate Countess de Cela, wildly in love with a

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young student; of Amelia Camarasa who died of consumption; of the Marquis of Tor, known to have had twenty-seven bastards. They talked of our venerable uncle, the noble Bishop of Mondoñedo who, with the saintly spirit of charity, sheltered in his palace the widow of a Carlist general. I took little notice of what Isabel and Concha were murmuring. From time to time, always at great intervals, they directed a question at me: "Perhaps you know, Xavier. How old is our uncle, the Bishop?"

"He must be seventy."

"Just what I said."

"I thought he was more."

And once again the smooth, warm murmur of feminine conversation resumed its flow until they turned to direct another question at me:

"Do you remember when it was my sisters took their final vows?"

Concha and Isabel seemed to look upon me as the family chronicle. So the evening passed.

About midnight the conversation, like the fire on the hearth, died down. After a long silence, Concha sat up, sighing with weariness, and tried to waken Maria Fernanda who was sleeping peacefully on her shoulder.

"Ah, darling child, I can't hold you any longer."

Maria Fernanda opened eyes heavy with the adorable sleep of childhood. Her mother leaned over to reach for her watch which lay in a jewel-box with her rings and her rosary: "Twelve o'clock and these children still up! Don't go to sleep again, precious."

And she tried to lift Maria Fernanda who had dropped her head to the arm of the sofa.

"You must be put to bed at once."

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With her pale lips curved to a faint smile, she regarded her youngest asleep in Isabel's arms with hair spread out around her, a child-angel sepulchred in waves of gold.

"Poor little mite, it hurts me to waken her. Will you ring, Xavier?" she added, turning to me.

At the same time Isabel tried to get up with the child in her arms.

"I can't, she is too heavy."

She gave up, vanquished, and smiled into my eyes. I went to her and took the little one carefully in my arms without waking her; the flood of gold streamed over my shoulder. At that moment we heard, in the corridor, the slow footsteps of Candelaria coming for the children to put them to bed. When she saw me with Maria Isabel in my arms, she approached respectfully: "I will take her, Señor Marquis. Don't trouble yourself any more."

And she smiled the kindly tranquil smile that one often sees on the lips of toothless grandmothers. Quietly, so as not to waken the child, I stopped her with a gesture. My cousin Isabel got up and took the hand of Maria Fernanda, who began to cry for her mother to put her to bed. Concha kissed her, saying: "Do you want Isabel to feel hurt?" And then, looking uncertainly from one to the other of us, anxious to please the child: "You don't want her to feel hurt, do you?"

The child, still drowsy-eyed, turned to Isabel with a beseeching look: "Would you feel hurt?"

"So hurt that I wouldn't sleep here to-night."

Maria Fernanda felt a great curiosity: "Where would you go to sleep?"

"Where could I go? To the priest's house?"

But the child realised it was not fitting that a lady of the house of Bendaña should be lodged elsewhere than in the

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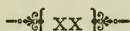
Brandeso Palace, so with mournful eyes she said good-night to her mother. Concha remained in the sitting-room alone. When we came back from the bed-room where the children slept we found her in tears.

"She grows more mad about you every day," Isabel said to me in an undertone.

Concha fancied she was murmuring something else, and she looked at us through her tears with jealous eyes. Isabel pretended not to notice it. Smiling, she entered the room in front of me and went over and sat on the sofa beside Concha.

"What is the matter, little cousin?"

Without answering, Concha brushed her handkerchief across her eyes and then ground it between her teeth. I looked at her with a smile of understanding and saw the red mount to her cheeks.



As I was closing the door of my bedroom I saw, in the dark corridor, a white shadow moving slowly along the wall. It was Concha. She came to me without a sound. "Are you alone, Xavier?"

"Alone with my thoughts."

"What bad company!"

"You have the power of divination. I was thinking of you."

Concha stopped at the threshold. Her eyes had a frightened expression and she smiled weakly. She looked toward the dark hall and shuddered, utterly pale: "I have just seen a black spider. . . . It was running along the floor. . . . It was enormous. I don't know whether I am bringing it in with me. . . ."

She shook the train of her white gown in the air. We went

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in and softly closed the door. Concha stopped in the middle of the room, drew a letter from her breast and held it out to me: "From your mother."

"For you, or for me?"

"For me."

As she gave it to me she covered her eyes with her hand and I saw her bite her lips to keep back the tears. At last she burst into sobs: "Oh, God. . . . Oh, God!"

"What does she say?"

Concha clasped her hands over her forehead which was almost hidden under great waves of black hair that streamed out tragically like heavy smoke from a torch in the wind.

"Read! Read! Read! . . . That I am the wickedest woman in the world. . . . That I am leading a scandalous life. . . . That I am doomed to eternal punishment. . . . That I am robbing her son!"

With great calmness I held the letter to the candle-flame.

"But I wanted you to read it," Concha moaned.

"No, my dear, the handwriting is too impossible."

Seeing the letter fly away in ashes, Concha dried her tears: "How could Aunt Soledad write to me like that when I love her and respect her so! Why should she hate me? Why should she curse me when nothing would give me greater joy than to care for her and wait upon her, like a daughter. Oh God, I am well punished. . . . To tell me that I am making you unhappy. . . ."

Without having read my mother's letter I could imagine it. Frenzied outcries—the angry anathemas of a sibyl—Biblical citations! I had received so many letters like it. The poor lady was a saint. She was not in a saint's niche only because, having been born head of a noble house, she felt it her duty to perpetuate an escutcheon as illustrious as that of

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Don Juan Manuel himself. But for the obligation of assuring male succession to the entail, with all its illustrious privileges and revenues, she would have been a saint in the Spanish manner, abbess of a convent, fanatical seer of visions, militant bride of Christ.

For many years now, my mother, Maria Soledad Carlota Elena Agar y Bendaña, had led a devout retired life in her Palace of Bradomín. She was a tall, grey-haired woman, very charitable, but credulous and despotic. I used to visit her every autumn. Although frail in health, the sight of her first-born always seemed to put new life into her. She passed her days seated at a great window in a chair of crimson velvet studded with silver nails, spinning for her servants. In the afternoons the sun reached to the depths of the room and marked a golden path like the stele of light in the saintly visions of Maria Soledad's childhood. In the silence, she heard day and night the distant murmur of the river as it fell over the mill-dam. My mother passed hours and hours at her spinning wheel with its distaff of blessed aromatic wood; a prayer forever trembled on her faded lips.

All my misdeeds she blamed upon Concha, holding her in horror for them. She remembered, and looked upon it as an affront to her white hairs, that our love affair had begun in the Bradomín Palace one summer that Concha had spent there to be a companion for her. My mother was Concha's godmother and, up to that time, had been extremely fond of her. After that she never saw her again. One day when I was away hunting, Concha left the Palace forever. She went alone, weeping, with covered head, like a heretic expelled by the Inquisition from a Spanish city of old. My mother's curse followed her from the door. Beside my mother stood a white-faced servant, the informer who told of our love. Perhaps

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the same lips had told her now that the Marquis of Bradomin was staying in the Brandeso Palace.

Concha continued to lament: "I am well punished. . . . I am well punished. . . ."

The round tears slid slowly down her cheeks, pure and clear as unset diamonds. My lips drank the tears on her eyes, on her cheeks, at the corners of her mouth. Concha laid her head upon my shoulder and shivered: "She will write to you too," she sighed. "What will you do then?"

"Whatever you wish," I whispered in her ear.

She was silent a moment, with closed eyes. When she opened them I saw intense love and the sorrow of renunciation. "If your mother writes, you must obey her."

She started to leave me. I stopped her. "You are not saying what you mean, Concha."

"Yes, I am saying what I mean. You know what injury I am doing my husband, day after day. Well, I swear that, in the hour of my death, I would rather have your mother's pardon than my husband's."

"You will have everybody's pardon, Concha—and the papal benediction as well."

"Ah, if God should hear you! But no, God cannot hear us—neither you nor me."

"We'll tell it to Don Juan Manuel, then. He has a more powerful voice."

Concha was in the doorway gathering up her white draperies. She shook her head reprovingly: "Xavier, Xavier!"

"You are not going?" I said, drawing near to her.

"Yes. I'll come again to-morrow."

"To-morrow you'll do as to-day."

"No. . . . I promise."

She was in the corridor now. I heard her call in a low

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tone: "Come with me. I am afraid of the spiders. Don't talk loud. Isabel sleeps in there."

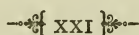
And her hand, ghost-like in the darkness, waved toward a closed door, from under which a pale gleam spread along the black floor.

"She sleeps with a light."

"Yes."

I stood still and drew her head to my shoulder. "You see . . . even Isabel cannot sleep alone. Let us follow her example."

She laughed silently. I lifted her in my arms, carried her as if she were a child down the long corridors to her room, and put her down before the door which stood open to the dark beyond.



I went to my bed exhausted and lay the whole morning, hearing between dreams the laughter and cries and racing of the two children. They were playing in the loggia upon which the three doors of my bedroom opened. I slept but little, in a miserable state of semi-consciousness. I noticed it when the children stopped in front of one of the doors and when they raised their voices. The green gadfly, nightmare, circled about me ceaselessly like the spindle of a spinning witch. All at once it seemed to me that the children were going away. A voice called them from the garden and they passed running before the three doors. The loggia was left deserted. I lay in a lethargy which in the most painful way destroyed all my volition. My thoughts, in a grotesque rhythm, wandered through an intricate maze and searched the baleful nest in which are born bad dreams and hideous ideas and torturing fancies.

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The silence was broken by the lively barking of dogs and the music of bells. A grave ecclesiastical voice which seemed to come from far off called: "Here, Capitán! . . . Here, Carabel!"

It was the parish priest of Brandeso who had come to the Palace after mass to pay his respects to my noble cousins. "Here, Capitán! . . . Here, Carabel!"

Concha and Isabel were taking leave of the priest from the terrace: "Good-bye, Don Benicio."

"Good-bye, Señoritas," the priest replied, descending the stairs. "Retire inside, for the air is cool. Here, Capitán! . . . Here, Carabel!"

I could hear distinctly the frolicsome racing of the dogs. After a moment's silence Concha's voice was raised languidly: "Don Benicio, you celebrate mass in the chapel to-morrow. You won't forget?"

And the grave ecclesiastical voice replied: "I shall not forget. . . . I shall not forget."

It ascended from the garden like a Gregorian chant, accompanied by the jingling of the dogs' bells. The two ladies said good-bye once more and the grave ecclesiastical voice repeated: "Here, Capitán! . . . Here, Carabel! Tell the Marquis de Bradomín that a few days ago I was hunting with the Chamberlain and we flushed a covey of partridges. Ask him when he will come out with me to shoot them. But don't tell the Chamberlain when he comes. He charged me to keep it secret."

Concha and Isabel passed before the three doors. Their voices were a soft, sweet murmur. The terrace regained its silence and in that silence I awoke completely and could not induce sleep to return. I rang a silver bell which, in the dimness of the bedroom, shone with ecclesiastical splendour on

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the crimson velvet cover of an antique table. Florisel came to serve me while I dressed. Time passed and I heard the children's voices again. They were coming from the pigeon-house with Candelaria. They carried a pair of young doves and were talking about them excitedly. The old servant was saying, as if it were a fairy-tale, that if they clipped the dove's wings they could let them free in the Palace.

"When mother was little, like us, she loved to play with pigeons too."

Florisel threw open the three doors that opened on the loggia. I walked out and called to the children who ran to kiss me—each with a white dove in her hands. They made me think of the celestial gifts accorded the young princesses who, like irises of cerulean blue, perfume the pages of the golden legend.

"Did you know that our uncle of Lantañon went off at daybreak on his horse?" the children asked me.

"Who told you so?"

"We went to his room to see him and found everything open, doors and windows, and the bed all tumbled. Candelaria says she saw him go—and Florisel too."

I could only laugh.

"Does your mother know?" I asked.

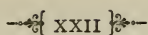
"Yes."

"And what does she say?"

The children looked at each other and hesitated. Then, with an exchange of smiles, they cried both together: "Mother says he's crazy."

Candelaria called them and they ran off to clip the wings of the young pigeons and free them in the rooms of the Palace—the game that Concha, as a child, had loved so much.

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In the shining laziness of afternoon, with all the windows of the loggia gilded by the sun and doves flying overhead, Isabel and the children talked of going with me to Lantañon to inquire how our uncle, Don Juan Manuel, had reached home.

"How far is it, Xavier?" Isabel asked.

"About two leagues."

"Then we can go on foot."

"Won't the children get tired?"

"They're used to walking."

The children rushed forward exclaiming radiantly in unison: "No, no! We climbed Pico Sagro last year without getting tired."

Isabel looked out toward the garden: "I think the weather will be fine."

"Who can tell! Those clouds carry water."

"Yes, but they are going the other way." Isabel trusted to the gallantry of the clouds.

We two were at the window, close together, talking and studying the sky and the landscape. The children were clapping their hands and screaming at the doves to frighten them into flying. I turned and saw Concha standing in the doorway. She was very pale, her lips were quivering and her eyes had a strange expression as she looked at me. There was anger in them and longing and supplication. She raised both hands to her forehead. "Florisel told me that you were in the garden," she murmured.

"We have been."

"You were hiding from me, it seems."

"Yes. We were conspiring," Isabel answered smiling.

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Taking the two children by the hand, she left the room with them. Concha and I were alone. She moved languidly over to her chair and sat down. She sighed heavily, as she often did, and told me she was dying. I went up to her laughing and she became indignant. "Laugh! You do well to leave me alone. Go with Isabel."

I took up one of her hands, bunched the fingers into a pale little rose, and with closed eyes kissed them.

"Don't make me suffer, Concha."

She dropped her lids over tear-filled eyes and said, in a low penitent voice: "Why do you want to leave me alone? It's not your fault, I know. It is she who is mad about you and runs after you."

I dried her tears: "Concha dear, it is you who are mad and nobody else, but it is such a charming madness that I would never wish to see it cured."

"I am not mad."

"Indeed you are—mad about me."

"No, no, no!" she repeated in pretty vexation.

"Yes."

"Conceited!"

"Why then do you want to keep me beside you?"

Concha threw her arms about my neck, kissed me and exclaimed laughing: "The truth is, if you are so vain of my affection, it must be because it is so valuable."

"Of priceless value."

Concha passed her hands over my hair in a lingering caress: "Let them go without you, Xavier. You see, I care more for you than for my own children."

Yielding like a submissive child, I pressed my head against her breast and closed my eyes. With rapturous ecstasy that yet was sorrow I breathed the perfume of that drooping flower.

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"I will do whatever you wish. You know that."

Looking me in the eyes and lowering her voice, Concha murmured: "Then you won't go to Lantañon?"

"No."

"Are you annoyed?"

"No. I am only sorry on the children's account. They were told they could go."

"They can go with Isabel—the major-domo can accompany them."

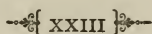
At that moment a sudden shower lashed the window panes and deluged the green garden; clouds obscured the sun; and the October afternoon took on a soft, sad light that seemed the very spirit of autumn.

Maria Fernanda entered much distressed: "Have you seen what bad luck we are having, Xavier? It is raining."

Then Maria Isabel came in: "May we go if it clears, Mamma?"

"Yes, if it clears," Concha answered.

The two children stationed themselves at the window and with faces glued against the glass watched the rain. Dark, lead-coloured clouds were gathering over La Sierra de Céltigos on a watery horizon; shepherds, calling their sheep, hurried down the road enveloped in capes of frieze; a rainbow spanned the garden; the dark cypress-trees and rain-washed myrtle trembled in rays of orange light. Candelaria, with skirts tucked up above clumping wooden shoes, went about, under a big blue umbrella, gathering roses for the chapel altar



The chapel was dark, damp, resounding. Above the altar hung a shield of sixteen quarterings, enamelled in colour,

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gules and azure, sable and sinople, gold and silver—the arms granted by writ of Their Catholic Majesties to Captain Alonzo Bendaña, founder of the house of Brandeso.

There is a wild legend recounted of this same Captain in the nobiliary accounts of Galicia. The tale goes that having taken prisoner his enemy, the Abbot of Mos, while on a hunting party, he dressed the abbot in a wolf-skin and turned him loose on the mountain, where his enemy was torn to pieces by the teeth of the dogs. Candelaria, Concha's old nurse, like all ancient servants, was intimately familiar with the history and genealogy of the house she served. And in the old days, she used to relate to us this legend of Captain Alonzo Bendaña, as it is given in those old accounts which no one now reads. But Candelaria knew furthermore that two black dwarfs had carried the Captain's body to hell. It was a tradition of the house of Bradomín that the men of the race were cruel and the women pious. I well remember the time when there was a chaplain attached to the Palace and my Aunt Agueda, following a noble old custom, used to hear mass from a small gallery near the pulpit, surrounded by all her daughters. In this gallery was a bench of crimson velvet, its high back crowned with two escutcheons, but only my Aunt Agueda, because of her age and failing health, enjoyed the privilege of being seated there.

At the right of the altar was interred Captain Alonzo Bendaña with other caballeros of his line. A statue of a praying warrior guarded the sepulchre. At the left of the altar was interred Doña Beatriz de Montenegro with other ladies of various lineage. The sepulchre was adorned by the statue of a praying nun, robed in the white habit of the Comendadoras de Santiago. The chancel lamp burned day and night before an altar-piece as finely wrought as the jewel

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of a queen. An evangelic vine laden with golden fruit framed the guardian saint, pious King Mago, as he offered myrrh to the Infant Jesus. His gold-embroidered, silken tunic shone with the splendour of an oriental miracle. The light of the lamp, between silver chains, had the timid flutter of a prisoned bird struggling to fly upward to the Saint.

That afternoon Concha desired to place with her own hands the rose-laden vases at the feet of King Mago as an offering of her devout spirit. Afterwards, accompanied by the children, she knelt before the altar. To me, in the gallery, Concha's voice was only a murmur as she recited the Ave Marias, but when it came to the children to respond I could hear every word of the ritual. At the end of the prayer, Concha kissed the rosary, got up and traversed the chancel, making the sign of the cross. She called the children to pray before the sepulchre of the warrior, where Don Miguel Bendaña, Concha's grandfather, was also buried. This Señor of Brandeso was in the act of dying at the time when my mother brought me to the Palace for the first time. Don Miguel Bendaña was an aristocrat, despotic, generous, faithful to the traditions of his house. Upright as a lance, he passed through the world with no unbending to the common touch. Beautiful and noble eccentricity! When he died, at eighty years, his spirit was still valiant, proud and finely tempered as an ancient sword. For five days he lay at the point of death refusing to confess himself. My mother asseverated that she had never seen the like. That old hidalgo was a heretic. One night, a short while after his death, I heard it related, in a hollow whisper, that Don Miguel Bendaña had murdered one of his own servants. Well might Concha pray for his soul!

The afternoon was dying; the prayers reverberated through the quiet dark of the chapel, solemnly sad like an echo of

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the Passion. I drowsed in the gallery. The children seated themselves on the steps before the altar. Their dresses were as purely white as the liturgic linen. I could just distinguish a shadow that prayed under the chancel lamp. It was Concha. She had an open book between her hands and read with head devoutly bent. Now and then, as the wind stirred the draperies of the great, high window, I could see the moon's pale, supernatural face gazing from the now darkened sky, like some goddess looking to her altars in wood and lake.

Concha closed the book with a sigh and called again to the children. I saw their white shadows flit across the chancel and I knew that they knelt beside their mother. The trembling lamplight shed a pale glory over Concha's hands as they supported the open book. In the silence her voice read slowly and devoutly. The children listened. I divined their bright hair flowing over the pure whiteness of their garments. Concha read.



It was the middle of the night. I was writing when Concha softly entered my room, wrapped in her nun-like gown. "To whom are you writing?" she asked.

"To Doña Margarita's secretary."

"What are you saying to him?"

"Giving an account of a donation for missions which I have made in the Queen's name."

There was a moment of silence. Concha stood, leaning her hands on my shoulders. As she bent over me her hair brushed my forehead. "Are you writing to her secretary or are you writing to the Queen herself?"

I turned with deliberate coldness: "I am writing to the secretary. Surely you are not jealous of the Queen?"

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"No, no," she protested eagerly.

I took her upon my knee and said, caressing her: "Doña Margarita is not like the other, you know. . . ."

"A great many things that were said of the other were calumny. My mother, who was her lady-in-waiting, always maintained so."

Seeing that I smiled, poor Concha dropped her eyes in adorable embarrassment.

"Men always believe the evil that is spoken of women. . . . And a queen has so many enemies!"

She saw the smile still on my lips and twisted my black moustache with her white fingers: "Naughty mouth!"

She stood up with the intention of going. With one hand, I detained her.

"Stay, Concha."

"It cannot be, Xavier. You know that."

"Stay," I repeated.

"No, no. . . . I want to confess to-morrow. . . . It frightens me to offend God like this."

I stood up, courteously, icily disdainful. "It appears, then, that I have a rival?"

Concha looked at me with supplication in her eyes: "Xavier, don't hurt me so."

"I have no wish to hurt you. I leave the Palace to-morrow."

Tearful, angry, she exclaimed: "You shall not leave to-morrow!"

Almost tearing off the clinging white gown, she stood naked, trembling.

I held out my arms: "My poor love!"

She looked at me through her tears, pale and changed:

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"How cruel you are. . . . Now I cannot confess to-morrow?"

I kissed her and said to console her: "We will both confess the day I leave."

I saw a fugitive smile pass in her eyes: "If you hope to gain your liberty with that promise you will not succeed."

"Why?"

"Because you are my prisoner for life."

Circling my neck with her arms she laughed. The black knot of her hair came down; she lifted the dusky perfumed flood in her white hands and whipped me with it.

"The lash of God!" I sighed, with eyes half closed.

"Be still, heretic!"

"Do you remember how this used to make me all but swoon?"

"I remember every bit of your mad behaviour."

"Whip me now, Concha. . . . Whip me as though I were the Divine Nazarene. . . . Whip me to death. . . ."

"Be still, be still."

With wild eyes and hands that trembled, she commenced to gather up the dark, perfumed mass. "You fill me with terror when you say such impious things. Yes, terror . . . because it is not you who speaks. It is Satan. Even to your voice you are different. It is Satan."

In extreme agitation she closed her eyes as my arms sheltered her lovingly. It seemed to me that a prayer strayed on her lips. Laughing, I sealed the lips with mine. "Amen. . . . Amen. . . . Amen!" I murmured.

There was a silence. Suddenly I felt her mouth moan under my mouth. "I am dying."

Her body, clasped in my arms, trembled as if shaken by a mortal chill. Her livid head rolled on the pillow in a faint.

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Her eyelids half opened, sluggishly; I saw her eyes, dulled, anguished.

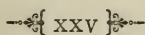
“Concha. . . . Concha. . . .”

I sat up against the pillow. Instantly cool and prudent I freed the hands that were still clasped around my neck. They were like wax.

I stood irresolute, not daring to move.

“Concha. . . . Concha. . . .”

Far off, I heard the howl of a dog. I slid to the floor without a sound. Seizing the light I gazed at the changed face. I touched the forehead with a trembling hand. The chill repose of death appalled me. No, I could not depend upon myself. I thought of fleeing and cautiously opened a window. With my hair standing on end I gazed out into the blackness, while inside the room the curtains of my bed fluttered and the flames of the candles in the silver stands wavered sickeningly. The dog’s howl still came from very far away; the wind went through the labyrinth complaining like a soul in pain; clouds passed over the moon and quenched the burning stars as death snuffs out poor human lives.



I left the window open and, moving without a sound, as if I feared my footsteps might waken the pallid spectre on the bed, I crossed to the door which, but a moment before, had been closed by hands tremulous with passion that now were motionless. Fearfully I looked down the black corridor and adventured into its dark. Everything in the Palace seemed to sleep. My footsteps scarcely made a sound, but they rang in my imagination with a fearful resonance. Far ahead, in the ante-chamber, a pale light trembled from the lamp that burned

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before the image of Jesus of Nazareth. That holy face, livid and discomposed, inspired a greater fear than the dead face of Concha. With trembling limbs I reached Concha's bedroom and stopped at the door to watch a streak of light, far down the corridor, which marked on the blackness of the floor the bedroom where my cousin Isabel was sleeping. I feared to see her appear, aghast and terrified at the sound of my footsteps. I feared her cries would alarm the Palace. I resolved to go in to her and tell her everything. I moved stealthily to her door. Opening it softly, I called in a muffled voice: "Isabel. . . Isabel. . ."

I waited. Nothing disturbed the silence. I took a few steps forward and called again: "Isabel. . . Isabel. . ."

Still no response. My voice died away in the vast chamber, as if too terrified to sound. Isabel was asleep. In the faint glow of the night-light that flickered in a crystal vase, my eyes made out the wooden bed. In the silence, my cousin Isabel's breathing rose and fell with a slow regular rhythm. Beneath the damask coverlet her body showed softly indefinite; her loose hair lay like a dark veil spread over the white pillows. I called again: "Isabel. . . Isabel. . ."

I had reached the bedside and stretched out my hand. By chance it rested on my cousin's bare, warm shoulder. I felt a quiver. In a low voice I spoke again: "Isabel. . . Isabel. . ."

Isabel sat up with a start: "Don't call. Concha can hear you."

My eyes filled with tears. Bending down I murmured: "Poor Concha cannot hear us."

One of Isabel's soft tempting curls touched my lips. I believe I kissed it. As with the saints, my heart is at its tenderest when touched with grief. Concha in heaven will

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have pardoned my weakness, for here on earth she knew it well. Isabel, breathing excitedly, whispered: "Had I suspected this I would have turned the key."

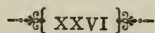
"Which way, Isabel?"

"To lock you out, bandit. To lock you out!"

I had not the heart to contravert my cousin Isabel's suspicions. To prove her mistaken would have been so ungallant and so painful. Isabel was pious and the knowledge that she had calumniated me would have caused her suffering. Ah me! All the saintly martyrs gone before me, monks, and patriarchs and holy fathers, were in better case than I to triumph over sin. The lovely women who tempted them were not their cousins. Life plays some cruel jests. When destiny smiles on me, it is always as it was that night, with the leering grimace of a bow-legged dwarf capering on castle chimney-tops by moonlight.

Suffocated by my kisses, Isabel stammered: "I'm afraid Concha may come."

A shudder of horror ran through my body. Isabel thought it was the ecstasy of love. She never knew why I had gone to her.



When my mortal eyes again beheld Concha's yellow disfigured face; when my feverish hands again touched her stiff hands, the terror that I felt was such that I began to pray, and again the temptation came to flee by the window which stood open to the dark, mysterious garden. The silent breeze of night fluttered the curtains and lifted the hair on my head. The stars were paling in the livid sky and the wind had visited the silver candelabra, extinguishing the flames till only one remained. The ancient cypresses, standing erect below the

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window, slowly bowed their melancholy tops and the moon passed fugitive and white between them like a soul in torment. In the silence the distant crow of a cock announced the imminent dawn. A shudder passed through my frame and I gazed with horror at the inanimate body of Concha stretched upon my bed. Then, suddenly recovering my senses, I lighted all the candles of the branching candlestick and placed it in the doorway to illuminate the corridor. I went back; my arms grasped with terror the ghastly phantom that had so often slept in them. I walked out with the funereal burden. As we crossed the threshold, an inert hand swung itself slowly through the burning candle-flames and knocked over the candelabrum. On the floor the candles continued to burn where they fell with a sickly, flickering light. For an instant I stood petrified and listened. All that I heard was the murmur of the fountain in the labyrinth. I went on. Ahead of me, in the vast ante-chamber, shone the lamp of the Nazarene; I was afraid to pass before that livid, dishevelled image. I feared its dead gaze. I went back.

To reach Concha's bedroom without going through the ante-chamber it was necessary to traverse the entire Palace. I did not hesitate. One after the other I passed through huge salons and shadowy corridors. At times the light of the moon reached into the deserted depths of the apartments. I moved like a shadow before the long succession of gloomy, leaded windows standing sombrely closed, in crumbling, blackened frames. When I crossed before a mirror I closed my eyes so as not to see myself. Cold sweat stood on my forehead. At times the darkness was so dense that I went astray and was forced to adventure at random—rigid, anguished—supporting the body with only one arm, the other stretched out before me to prevent a stumble. As we passed through a doorway, a

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waving strand of the tragic hair caught and held fast. I groped about in the blackness trying to loosen it. I could not. It became more entangled every moment. My hand, stupid with terror, trembled over it and the door pulled slowly open and closed, creaking lengthily. To my horror, I saw that day was dawning. Giddiness seized me and I pulled . . . the body seemed trying to escape my arms. In desperation, I clasped it more tightly. Under the forehead, tight-drawn and dark, the waxen eyelids slowly opened. I pressed them shut and pulled brutally until the beloved, perfumed hair broke. . . . With the body grappled in my arms I fled.

I reached the open door of Concha's bedroom. The warm perfumed dark beyond breathed mystery as if it still guarded the tender secret of our amorous hours. What a tragic secret it must guard henceforth!

Carefully, cautiously, I left Concha's body stretched upon the bed and moved away without a sound. At the door I stopped, irresolute, and drew a long breath. I was uncertain whether to go back and place a last kiss upon those icy lips. I resisted the temptation. An almost religious scruple constrained me. I feared there might be something sacrilegious in the sensuous grief that possessed me. The warm fragrance of the bedroom kindled voluptuous memories of the senses that were a torture to me. I fervently desired to feel pure and sweet, but could not control my wild imaginings. It has happened at times even to the mystics that sacred things have suggested to them monstrous diabolisms. To this day there is a touch of subtle depravity in the sorrow that the memory of Concha's death brings to me. It claws at my heart like a lean cat with glittering eyes. It twists my heart till it bleeds in agony, yet all the while, deep down, the devil in me, who can change all grief to glee, laughs and laughs.

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My memories, lost glories of my soul, are like burning music, cruel and sad, to whose strange rhythm dances the weeping phantom that was my love. Poor white phantom! Worms have eaten the eyes; tears roll from the sockets as it dances in the ring of my youthful memories; never touching earth, it floats upward on a wave of perfume, the scent of her sweet hair which lives on after she has gone. Poor Concha! Her passage through the world left behind no more than a wake of perfumes. But it may be that she, the whitest and chastest of my loves, was never more than an exquisite incarnation of the sensuous perfumes of Aphrodite.



Maria Isabel and Maria Fernanda first announced themselves by knocking with childish hands upon my door. Then came their fresh voices, crystal clear, like the voice of a mountain spring as it talks with the birds and the flowers. "May we come in, Xavier?"

"Yes, children, come in."

The morning was well advanced and they had come to inquire, in Isabel's name, how I had passed the night—a gentle question that filled my heart with remorse. The children stood beside me, in the window, looking out into the garden. The frowning green branches of a yew tree brushed mournfully against the panes. Under the wind from the mountains the yew felt shiverings of cold, and the touch of its green branches on the panes seemed like an appeal from the dark old garden for the children to come out and play. Deep in the labyrinth, a band of doves circled about close to the ground, and from the cold blue sky above a keen-eyed hawk

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swooped down on long, black wings. "Oh, Xavier, kill it! . . . Kill it!" the children cried.

I went for the gun which slept, dust-covered, in a corner of my room and came back to the balcony. The children clapped their hands: "Kill it! Kill it!"

At that moment the hawk fell upon the doves which flew about terror-stricken. I put the gun to my cheek and, when an opening came, fired. Some dogs barked in the fields near by. The doves wheeled about in the smoke and the hawk, with wings outstretched, fell dead. The children ran down and picked it up by the tips of the wings. Bright blood trickled from the plumage of the breast. They started off carrying the hawk triumphantly between them. A new anxiety awoke in me.

"Where are you going?" I called to them.

They turned in the doorway, smiling delightedly. "Wait and see how we will frighten mother when she wakes up."

"No, no, no!"

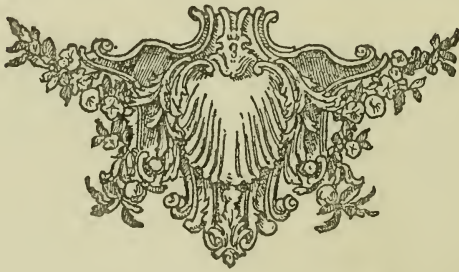
"Oh, just a make-believe fright."

I did not dare to stop them. I stayed and waited, sick at heart. Bitter suspense! Waiting on that radiant morning of sunlight for the fatal moment when the cries of the innocent should ring through the chambers of the Palace! Heart-broken moans and violent sobbings. . . .

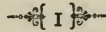
I felt the dull anguish of despair in the presence of that mute, cold phantom, Death, who reaped the dreams in the garden of my heart . . . beautiful dreams conjured up by the magic of love! An extraordinary sadness fell upon me; as if the twilight were closing in upon my life; as if my life like a dreary day of winter were drawing to a close, to begin anew, to-morrow, with a sunless dawn. Poor Concha was dead! Dead, that flower of my dreams to whom all my

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words seemed beautiful! That flower of my dreams to whom my every gesture seemed sublime! . . . Would I ever again encounter a pale princess with enchanting, sorrowful eyes who would see me always magnificent? In the face of this doubt I wept. Wept like an outworn god of antiquity, lamenting the extinction of his cult.



Sonata of Winter



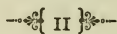
HE women for whom, in days gone by, I sighed are dead. I closed the eyes of one; from another came a letter of sad good-bye, and all the others died, grandmothers, when the memory of myself had long since faded into oblivion. I have wakened many and great loves, yet to-day I dwell in a mournful solitude of spirit.

Tears fill my eyes as I comb my snowy locks, remembering with a sigh that in other days the hands of princesses caressed them. My passage through life was a gorgeous flowering of all the passions. One after the other my days were warmed by the flaming sun of love. The purest spirits lavished their tenderness upon me, wept at my cruelty, despaired at my indifference. Pale, ardent fingers stripped white marguerites to learn the secret their slender petals guarded. That she might preserve forever a secret which I trembled to divine, one whom

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I shall never cease to weep, a child, sought death. My hair was white when I inspired this last unhappy love.

I had just arrived at Estella where the king had established his court. My long journey through the world had left me wearied in spirit. I was beginning to feel something till then unknown in my gay life of adventure, a life of risk and hazard shared with that reckless brood of younger sons who sought fortune, love and glory in the regiments of Italy. Now an end had come to all illusion; life had left me profoundly disabused. It was the first chill of age, more dismal than the chill of death; and it came upon me when I still wore over my shoulder the Mantle of Almaviva and on my head the Helmet of Mambrino. For me the hour had struck when the fires of the blood burn low; when all the passions, love, pride, anger, the divine and lofty passions that inspired the ancient gods, submit to become the slaves of reason. I was starting upon the decline of life, the propitious age for realising all ambition, stronger than youth itself—if one but renounce the love of women. Alas, that I did not make the renunciation!



I arrived at the court of Estella, a fugitive, disguised in the habit which a French monk had abandoned in a farm-house kitchen, to take the field for Don Carlos VII.

The bells of San Juan were ringing for the royal mass. As an act of grace for having been spared my life, I desired to hear the mass with the dust of the road still upon me. When I entered the church the priest was already at the altar. The wavering light of a lamp fell upon the steps of the presbytery in front of which was grouped the court. Among those dark forms, without face or contour, my eyes could distinguish only

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the tall figure of the Señor. He stood out amidst his retinue, admirably gallant and noble, like a king of old. His stateliness and power seemed to call for richly ornamented armour from the goldsmiths of Milan, and a charger of war in a splendid coat of mail. His vivid, eagle-like glance would have flashed magnificently beneath a casque with crested crown and floating lambrequin. Don Carlos de Borbón y de Este was the one sovereign prince who could trail the ermine mantle, grasp the golden sceptre and wear the jewelled crown like the kings pictured in the ancient scrolls.

The service over, a friar mounted the pulpit and, in the Basque idiom, preached the holy war to the Biscayan regiments which had just arrived to act for the first time as escort to the King. I was deeply affected. The strong, austere words, rough-edged as the weapons of the Stone Age, gave me an indefinable sensation. They had the sonorousness of ancient times. They were primitive, majestic, like the furrows of earth where the seed is sown after the plough has passed. Without understanding them I could feel that they were loyal, true, stern, grave. Don Carlos, with his retinue, stood during the sermon facing the preaching friar. Doña Margarita and her ladies remained upon their knees. I was able then to recognise some of the faces. I remember that the Court, that morning, was composed of the Prince and Princess de Caserta, Marshal Valdespina, Condesa Maria Antonieta Volfani, lady-in-waiting to Doña Margarita, the Marquis de Lantana (a Neapolitan title), the Baron de Valatié, a French Legitimist, Brigadier Adelantado, and my uncle, Don Juan Manuel Montenegro.

When the friar's discourse was ended, I was afraid that I might be recognised and remained kneeling in the shadow of the pillar until the King and Queen had left the church.

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At the side of Doña Margarita walked a tall woman covered with a black veil that almost touched the ground. She passed close to me, and while I could not see her face I could feel the glance of eyes that recognised me through my Carthusian disguise. As if a breath of wind came and went, I had an instant's recollection of this lady, but the memory vanished before it became distinct. As soon as the church was quite deserted I rose and went into the sacristy. Two old priests were talking together in a corner where a faint ray of sunlight fell. A sacristan who was even more ancient than the clerics stood before a high grated window blowing on the burning coals of a censer. I stopped in the doorway. The clerics paid no attention to me, but the sacristan looked up with eyes reddened by smoke and inquired gravely: "Does Your Reverence come to say mass?"

"I come to seek my friend, Fray Ambrosio Alarcón."

"Fray Ambrosio is not yet here."

"If you are in haste," one of the priests interrupted, "you'll surely meet him coming by the church."

At that moment there was a knock and the sacristan hurried to draw the bolt. The other priest, who until then had not spoken, murmured: "I think he's here now."

The sacristan opened the door and there, silhouetted against the background, stood the figure of that famous friar who, until the day of his death, continued to say masses for the soul of Zumalacárregui. He was a giant of bones and parchment, with stooping shoulders and sunken eyes; there was a constant tremor of his head, the effect of a cut on his neck received when he was a soldier in the first war. The sacristan detained him at the door. "A reverend father is inquiring for you," he informed him in a low voice. "No doubt he comes from Rome."

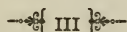
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I waited. Fray Ambrosio looked me up and down without recognising me. Nevertheless, he placed a cordial hand upon my shoulder.

“Is it Fray Ambrosio Alarcón whom you wish to see? Have you not made a mistake?”

For all response I let fall my cowl. The old guerilla warrior looked at me in smiling surprise. Turning to the clerics he exclaimed: “This reverend father is called, in the lay world, the Marquis de Bradomín.”

The sacristan ceased blowing on the censer; the two priests, seated before a brazier in the ray of sunlight, rose to their feet with beatific smiles. I felt an instant’s vanity at this reception, for it proved how great was my reputation at the Court of Estella. They gazed at me with love in their eyes, and perhaps with a shade of paternal grievance as well, for they all wore the garb of the Church and they were perhaps recalling some of my adventures in the world.



They gathered around me and I was obliged to tell them the history of my monk’s garb and the manner in which I had passed the frontier. Fray Ambrosio laughed jovially while the clerics gazed at me over their spectacles with an expression of uncertainty on their toothless mouths. Behind them, in the ray of sunlight which fell through the narrow window, the sacristan stood in rapt attention. Whenever the ex-cloistered monk interrupted, he would remonstrate with severity: “Man of God! Let him tell his tale!”

But Fray Ambrosio would not let it pass for truth that I had come from a monastery whither my disillusionment with

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life and repentance for my sins had taken me. More than once, as I talked, he turned to the priests, murmuring: "You must not believe our illustrious Marquis; it's one of his diverting fabrications."

To suppress this continued show of doubt, I had to make solemn affirmations of the truth of my tale. After that, Fray Ambrosio simulated a profound conviction, crossing himself with a show of great astonishment: "'Live and learn' is well said! For while I did not take him to be godless, I never should have suspected this religious spirit in the Marquis de Bradomín."

"Repentance does not come heralded by bugles, like a troop of cavalry," I answered gravely.

Just at that moment a bugle sounded boots and saddles and everybody laughed. One of the clerics asked in a tone of amiable irony: "Neither, I presume, did repentance come stealthily, like the serpent?"

I breathed a melancholy sigh: "It came as I looked in the mirror and saw my white hairs."

The two priests exchanged such discreet smiles that thereafter I took them for Jesuits. Crossing my hands, in an attitude of penitence, on the scapular of my habit, I sighed again: "To-day the fatality of destiny casts me once again upon the sea of life. I have succeeded in dominating all the passions except pride. Even with the sackcloth of penitence upon me, I still remember that I am the Marquis de Bradomín!"

Fray Ambrosio raised his arms and at the same time lifted a voice whose ponderousness was tempered by the classic joviality of the monastery: "Carlos V, in the monastery of Yuste, also remembered his imperial dignity."

The clerics smiled faintly, the smiles of catechists. The

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sacristan, sitting in the ray of sunlight, grumbled: "No, you will not let him tell his tale!"

Fray Ambrosio laughed exuberantly at his own words. The vague, formless reverberation of his jovial laugh was still sounding through the vaulted sacristy when a pale seminarist entered. His mouth was scarlet like a girl's, in contrast to his white face; his curved nose and bright pupils, veiled by heavy eyelids, gave him the cruel expression of a young eagle.

Fray Ambrosio received him with mock deference, bending his tall figure in an exaggerated bow; his trembling head seemed as if it would shake loose from his shoulders: "Welcome, glorious captain, yet unsung! Second Epaminondas, whose heroic feats will be recited down the ages by another Cornelius Nepos! Salute the Marquis de Bradomín!"

The seminarist removed his black cap, which, with a well-worn cassock, completed the dress of his gallant person; with the blood mounting to his cheeks, he saluted me. Fray Ambrosio, placing a hand upon his shoulder, shook him with rough affection as he said: "If this young man succeeds in getting fifty men together, he will give us much to talk about. He will be another Don Ramón Cabrera. He is as brave as a lion."

The student drew back to free himself from the hand that pressed upon his shoulder. He fixed his bird-like eyes on me as if he were reading my thoughts and answering them.

"Some people think," he said, "that bravery is not necessary for a great general, and perhaps they are right. If Don Ramón Cabrera had had less temerity who knows but his military genius might have been more fruitful."

Fray Ambrosio looked at him scornfully: "My son, Epaminondas, if he had had less temerity, might have spent his life singing psalms; and that's what may happen to you."

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The student's smile was admirable: "It will not happen to me, Fray Ambrosio."

The two priests sat before the brazier in smiling silence. One held his trembling hands above the coals while the other turned the pages of his breviary. The sacristan, with closed eyes, seemed disposed to follow the example of the cat which lay sleeping on his cassock. Fray Ambrosio instinctively lowered his voice: "You say such things because you are young, and you believe all the sophistries with which some of these generals—who by rights should be bishops—excuse their fear. I have seen a great deal. I had taken the vows in a monastery in Galicia when the first war broke out, and I doffed the cassock, and fought for seven years in the armies of the King; and, by my cassock, I tell you that to be a great general one must first be a great soldier. You may laugh at those who say Napoleon was a coward."

The glow in the seminarist's eyes was like the glitter of the sun on two leaden bullets: "Fray Ambrosio, if I had a hundred men I would command them like a soldier. If I had a thousand, I would command them like a general; and with only one thousand, I could insure the triumph of the Cause. Great armies are not needed in this war. With a thousand men I would undertake an expedition through the entire kingdom like the one executed thirty-five years ago by Don Miguel Gómez, the greatest general of the past war."

"Illustrious and beardless warrior, have you perhaps heard of a certain Don Tomás Zumalacárregui? He was the greatest general of the Cause. If we only had a man like him to-day, the triumph of the Cause would be assured."

The seminarist made no answer to this; but the two clerics assumed a scandalised air, and one of them said: "There can be no doubt of our victory!"

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The other added: "The justice of the Cause is the best general."

And I added, feeling, beneath the penitential sackcloth, the fire that inspired San Bernardo when he preached the Crusades: "The best general is the help of the Lord our God."

There was a murmur of approbation, fervent as a prayer. The seminarist said nothing but continued to smile. In the midst of the conversation the church-bell began to toll solemnly. The old sacristan rose and shook his cassock, upon which the cat lay sleeping. Several priests entered who were come to celebrate a funeral service. The seminarist donned his surplice; the sacristan came forward and handed him the burning censer which filled the vast room with its fragrant smoke. The worn voices of the old priests kept up a sober murmur as they put on the linen albs and donned the copes in whose golden folds lingered the perfume of a hundred years of burning myrrh. The seminarist entered the church, the chains of the censer clanking; the priests in their robes walked behind. I was left alone with the friar who opened his long arms and, clasping me to his breast, murmured with deep feeling: "The Marquis de Bradomín still remembers the days when I taught him Latin in the Monastery of Sobrado?"

Regaining his theological smile, he gave a little introductory cough and asked, in a low voice as if he were in the confessional: "Will the illustrious nobleman pardon me if I say that I did not believe the tale he regaled us with a moment since?"

"What tale?"

"Of your conversion. May I know the truth?"

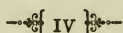
"Where no one hears us, Fray Ambrosio."

With a sober look he nodded his head. I fell silent with pity for the poor monk who preferred fact to romance; who

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seemed eager for a narrative far less interesting, less commendable and less beautiful than the tale of my invention.

Oh, smiling Falsehood with your wings of bright illusion! When shall it be proved to men that yours must be the final triumph! When shall men learn that souls guided by the light of truth alone are sad, stern, tortured souls that spread over life a shroud of ashes while, in the silence, they commune with death! Hail, smiling Falsehood, bird of light whose song is a pæan of hope! Let it not, like many things, escape through your broken walls, ye barren Thebais, cities of solitude and silence whose tolling church-bells seem to sound your knell! Let it not escape! For it is gallantry at your grated windows and glory upon your crumbling shields. It is the sun's reflection on the river that runs turbid beneath the Roman arches of your bridges. Like confession it brings solace to the disconsolate; it makes the spirit blossom and renews the heart with grace. Cherish it, for it too is a gift from heaven. Ancient Land of the Sun, Land of the Bull, may you preserve, throughout the centuries, your laughing, bragging spirit of Hyperbole and Falsehood. May your sleep be lulled for centuries with the sound of the guitar. So may you be comforted for your heaviest sorrows—the convent supper for the poor and the Indies that are gone forever! Amen!



Fray Ambrosio considered it an obligation of honour that he should entertain me, and I felt obliged to accept his hospitality. He came out with me, and together we walked through the streets of the loyal city, the sacred ark of the Cause. It had been snowing and, close to the dark houses, sheltered from the dripping eaves, was a pure white bank.

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Now and then, at the narrow windows, one saw some old woman with a mantilla over her head peering out to see if the weather had cleared so that she might go to mass. We passed a big, rambling house flanked by walls so high that the cypresses of the garden barely showed above. There were rusty gratings at the windows and a great shield above the nail-studded door which stood open, revealing a vestibule within, where a great iron lantern threw a dim light over benches of polished oak.

"The Duquesa de Uclés lives there," Fray Ambrosio said.

I smiled, understanding the monk's sly implication.

"Is she as beautiful as ever?"

"They say so; my own eyes cannot vouch for it, for she always goes out covered with a veil."

I could not repress a sigh.

"She was a great friend of mine years ago."

"I know."

"A secret of the confessional?"

"An open secret. A poor friar from the cloister does not have spiritual daughters of such exalted station."

We walked on in silence. My thoughts drifted back to happier times when I was young and gallant and a poet. Those distant days flowered in my memory with the charm of a half-forgotten tale, bringing a scent of fading roses and the cadence of a poem of long ago. Alas! Both poem and roses belonged to the happy days when *mi bella* was still a dancer and I sang her beauty in verses of Oriental fervour. Her body was fair as the desert palm. The Graces grouped about her skirts with song and laughter like the chime of golden bells. But in truth one could not too extravagantly paint her beauty. It matched in loveliness her name, Carmen, which holds all the grace of Andalusia, the poetry of ancient

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Rome and the perfume of the gardens of Araby. As memory brought her back to me and I thought of the years that had passed since I had seen her, the thought came too that in those distant days my friar's habit would have brought a burst of silver laughter.

"The Duquesa still lives in Estella?" I asked, almost unconsciously.

"She is one of Doña Margarita's ladies; but she never leaves her palace except to attend mass."

"I am tempted to go back and call upon her."

"There is time enough for that."

When we reached the church of Santa Maria, we were forced to take refuge in the doorway to leave the street clear for a troop of Castilian lancers who were returning from guard outside the city. The lively chorus of the bugles mingled with the neighing of the horses; the clang of hoofs on the ancient pavement had the valiant, martial sound of paladins' arms in the tales of romance. The horsemen rode off in file and we continued our way.

"We are almost there."

And Fray Ambrosio pointed down the street to a small house with a worm-eaten wooden balcony supported by columns. An old wolf-hound, asleep on the threshold, growled at us but did not move. The vestibule was dark and smelt of hay and the steam of cattle. Feeling our way, we went up a staircase that shook under our feet. When we reached the top, the monk pulled a chain that hung at one side of the door, and a worn bell inside jangled furiously. We heard footsteps and then the voice of the housekeeper grumbling: "A fine way to ring the bell! What is it?"

Brusque and imperious, the monk answered: "Open!"

"Ave Maria! What a hurry we're in!"

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We heard her still grumbling as she drew back the bolt; the monk muttered irritably: "The hag is unbearable!"

When she opened the door the woman was even more insolent.

"How would it be to come without company once in a while! I suppose you've so much food to spare you must bring some one every day to help you eat it?"

Fray Ambrosio grew white with anger; he raised gigantic, menacing arms and waved his parchment-like hands above his shaking head: "Silence, scorpion tongue! . . . Silence, and learn respect. Do you know whom you insult with your infamous words? Do you know, I say? Do you know who stands before you? . . . Beg the pardon of the Marquis de Bradomín."

Oh, insolence of the serving-woman! On hearing my name the creature showed neither repentance nor uneasiness. She fixed black witch's eyes upon me, like those of some old woman painted by Goya, and with a look of incredulity she muttered through thin lips: "If he is the gentleman you say, long life to him. Amen!" Still muttering she stepped aside to let us in. "Fine mud they bring on their feet. Divine Jesus, what they have done to my floors!"

Those spotless shining floors, mirrors to reflect her ugliness, were the love of the old crone's life, and they had just been barbarously defiled. Turning in consternation to discover the full horror of my sacrilege, I saw such a look of hatred in the woman's eyes that I was frightened. She continued mumbling: "They've been out killing revolutionists. . . . Pity they must spoil my floors. . . . Little they care."

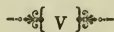
"Silence!" Fray Ambrosio shouted from the living-room. "And serve the chocolate at once."

His voice boomed through the house like the detonation

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of cannon. It was the voice with which in the old days he had commanded his soldiers, the one sound that could make them tremble; but the old woman must have had something of Queen Isabel's spirit, for she merely turned her withered face and muttered more sourly than ever: "At once? At once will be when it's ready. Sweet Jesus, give me patience!"

Fray Ambrosio coughed and a cavernous echo answered; the continued mumbling of the old woman came from the back of the house. In the moments of silence the tick of a clock was like the pulse-beat of the house—the house of a monk where an old woman, surrounded by her cats, was queen. The clock hung on the wall with pendulum and weights exposed. Tick, tick, tick, tick. It seemed to me that the friar's cough, the grumble of the old woman and the soliloquy of the clock blended in a grotesque rhythm, like some old witch's song.



I stripped off my monk's garb and stood in the uniform of a pontifical zouave. Fray Ambrosio gazed at me with child-like delight, waving his long, loose arms in extravagant admiration.

"My soul, what a magnificent costume!"

"You are not familiar with it?"

"Only in painting, from a portrait of the Infante Don Alfonso."

Eager to learn the truth of my adventure, he asked, with his tonsured head trembling violently: "Now, may I hear the reason for your monk's garb?"

"A disguise to avoid falling into the hands of the cursed priest," I answered indifferently.

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"Santa Cruz?"

"Yes."

"He is encamped at Oyarzun at the moment."

"And I come from Arimendi. I was sick with fever and lay hidden there in an isolated farm-house."

"God save us! But why does the priest wish you evil?"

"He knows that it was I who obtained the King's order for Lizárraga to have him shot."

Fray Ambrosio straightened his huge frame: "A bad deed! A bad deed! A bad deed!"

"The priest is a bandit," I answered imperiously.

"In war these bandits are necessary. However, this is no war, but a farce staged by the freemasons."

I could not help laughing: "Masons?"

"Yes. Dorregaray is a mason."

"But the man who wants to shoot the beast, the man who has sworn his extermination, is Lizárraga."

The friar came toward me, gripping his shaking head with both hands as if he feared it might roll from his shoulders: "Don Antonio thinks that war is made by pouring holy water instead of blood. . . . The mass can settle everything! But the sacrament that one receives in war is the sacrament of lead. Don Antonio is a contemptible monk like me—in fact more monkish than I am, though he has taken no vows. We old fellows who went through the other war realise this and feel ashamed, actually ashamed! They have given me a lieutenancy."

He clasped his head more firmly in his hands and sat down in a big chair to wait for the chocolate. Its arrival was heralded by the old woman's step in the corridor and the tinkling of cups on metal trays. When she came in, her

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manner was entirely changed. She now showed the placid, smiling face of an old woman contented with her household duties, her knitting and her rosary.

"*Santos y buenos días!* The Señor Marquis does not remember me, though I used to hold him on my lap. I am the sister of Micæla la Galana. You remember Micæla la Galana, a maid for many years with your grandmother, the Condesa?"

Gazing at the old woman, I murmured, with genuine feeling: "Alas, señora, I do not even remember my grandmother!"

"A saint she was! There'll be no one like her in heaven—sitting alongside of our Lord Jesus!"

She placed the two trays on a little table and, with a whispered word in the monk's ear, withdrew. The steaming chocolate gave forth a deliciously grateful aroma. It was the traditional chocolate of the monastery, the choice brand that the viceroys of the Indies used to send the abbots in the old days. My former Latin master remembered well this gastronomic felicity, the ecclesiastical bounty, the merry entertainment, the joyous feasting, ever longingly recalled, of the Royal and Imperial Monastery of Sobrado!

Fray Ambrosio mumbled the customary Latin grace and swallowed the cup of chocolate at one gulp. Then, with the elegant concision of the classic age of Augustus, he rendered judgment: "Delicious!"—adding: "Nothing can compare with the chocolate made by the blessed nuns of Santa Clara!"

Breathing a sigh of deep satisfaction, he returned to our former subject: "God save us, you were right not to tell them in the sacristy the true history of your disguise. The priests are all zealous partisans of Santa Cruz."

He sat thinking for a moment, then gave a mighty yawn

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and made the sign of the cross before his mouth. It was as huge and black as a wolf's.

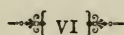
"God save us! And what does the Marquis de Bradomín want with this poor monk?"

"We will speak of that later," I murmured with simulated indifference.

"Possibly it will not be necessary," the friar insinuated craftily, "for I still exercise the office of chaplain in the house of the Condesa de Volfani. The Señora Condesa is well, though a little sad . . . and this is precisely the hour for me to visit her."

I looked vague and drew from my pouch a gold *onza*: "Let us have done with worldly affairs, Fray Ambrosio. This *onza* is to say a mass for my happy escape."

The monk took the coin without a word. Then he offered me his bed for a nap to recuperate from my journey. The bed had seven mattresses; there was a crucifix at the head, and standing opposite was a big-bellied chest of drawers with a horn inkstand upon it. On the top of the inkstand was a priest's silk cap.



It rained all day. During brief clearings, a sad grey light broke over the mountains that encircled the sacred city of the Carlists where the sound of rain on the window-panes is wearily familiar. From time to time, the dreary winter tedium was relieved by the lively sound of bugles or by church-bells calling the nuns to a novena. I had to present myself to the King, and I went out while Fray Ambrosio was still away. A veil of fog undulated in the gusts of wind; two soldiers crossed the plaza with dejected step, their ponchos dripping water; I heard the monotonous singing of children

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in a school. The livid light of afternoon fell sadly on the deserted, rain-swept plaza. Several times I lost myself in the streets and saw no one but a sister of charity from whom I could inquire my way. It was almost dark when I reached the residence of the King.

“You doffed your monk’s garb promptly, Bradomín!”

These were the words with which Don Carlos received me. I answered in a tone so low that no one but the King could hear: “It hampered my movements, Señor.”

The King murmured in the same low tone: “I am hampered by them too; unfortunately I am not so easily rid of them.”

“You should have them shot, Señor,” I made bold to answer. The King smiled and led me to a window-corner.

“I see that you have talked with Cabrera. Those are his ideas. Cabrera, as you know, is the declared enemy of the ultramontane party and the factious clergy. He is wrong, for they are a powerful auxiliary now. Believe me, without them the war would not be possible.”

“Señor, you know that the general is no partisan of the war itself.”

The King was silent for a moment.

“I know it. Cabrera imagines that the quiet work of the juntas would have borne better fruit. I think he is mistaken. . . . As to the rest, I am no friend of the factious priests either. I have said this once before on the occasion when you told me that Santa Cruz should be shot. If, for a time, I opposed forming a counsel of war, it was because I wished to prevent the union of republican troops engaged in pursuing him for fear they would then fall upon us. That is just what happened, as you know, and now this priest has cost us the loss of Tolosa.”

The King paused again and glanced about the room, a dark

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salon with walnut floors; its walls were covered with the arms and banners won in the Seven Years' War by those old generals whose feats have now passed into legend. Over in the farthest corner, the Bishop of Urgel, Don Carlos Calderón, conversed in low tones with Don Diego Villandarias. The King smiled lightly with an expression of sad indulgence that I had never seen on his face before: "They are jealous because I am talking with you, Bradomín. You are unquestionably *persona non grata* with the Bishop of Urgel."

"How can you tell that, Señor?"

"By the glance he casts in your direction. Go and kiss his ring."

I was withdrawing to obey the order, when the King, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, said: "Bradomín, do not forget that you dine with us to-night."

I bowed low: "I thank you, Señor."

As I approached the group where the Bishop stood, there was a sudden silence. His lordship received me with cold affability: "Welcome, Señor Marquis."

I responded with lordly condescension, as if the Bishop of the Cathedral of Urgel were a humble chaplain of my house: "Greeting, Ilustrísimo Señor!"

With an obeisance more courteous than pious, I kissed the pastoral amethyst. His lordship had the high spirit of those feudal bishops who wore their swords beneath their cloaks. He drew his brows together in a frown and attempted to punish me with a homily: "Señor Marquis de Bradomín, I have just learned of a clumsy jest contrived this morning to ridicule two poor credulous priests. Not only did it mock the sackcloth of penitence, but it showed disrespect to the sanctity of the place, since the hoax was perpetrated in the Church of San Juan."

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"In the sacristy, Señor Bishop," I interrupted.

His lordship, who was now rather short of wind, paused for an instant to draw breath: "I was told it was in the church. But even if it was in the sacristy, Señor Marquis, your tale was a burlesque of the lives of some of the saints. If, as I assume, your monk's garb was not a carnival costume, there was no profanation in the wearing of it. But the tale you related to the priests was a mockery worthy of the impious Voltaire."

The prelate was evidently going on to discourse upon every man listed in the encyclopedia. Seeing the mind he was in, I trembled with repentance: "I acknowledge my fault and am ready to perform whatever penance your lordship deigns to impose."

At this triumph of his eloquence, the sainted man smiled benevolently: "We will perform the penance together."

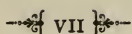
I looked at him without understanding. The prelate pressed a dimpled white hand upon my shoulder and condescendingly explained his irony: "We both dine at the King's table, and there fasting is imposed upon one. Don Carlos practises the self-denial of a soldier."

"His ancestor, El Bearnés, dreamed of a state where every one of his subjects should have a fowl in the pot. Don Carlos, knowing that this is the chimera of a poet, elects to fast with his devoted subjects."

"Marquis," the Bishop interrupted, "I will have none of such jesting. The King is sacred."

I lifted my right hand to my heart, in token that I could not, though I would, forget it, since there my sovereign's altar was. And I took my leave, for I had to present my respects to Doña Margarita.

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As I entered the salon where the Señora and her ladies were embroidering scapulars for the soldiers, a reverential, chivalrous emotion surged into my heart. I understood then all the artless sentiment of knight-errantry, that cult of beauty and of feminine tears which made the heart of Tirante el Blanco beat fast beneath his coat of mail. More than ever I felt myself a Caballero of the Cause. I longed, as for a grace, to die for that pale princess, saintly and distant, with hands like lilies and the perfume of a legend in her name. It was a loyalty of other centuries that Doña Margarita inspired.

She received me with a smile that enchanted me with its noble melancholy: "You will not be offended if I continue with my embroidery, Bradomín. I treat you as an old friend."

She left the needle in the scapular for a moment to extend her hand. I bent and kissed it reverently.

"They tell me you have been ill," the Queen continued. "I find you a little pale. You seem to be one who never cares for himself. That is not right. If you will not do it for yourself, you must do it for the King, who is so much in need of loyal servitors like you. Bradomín, we are surrounded by traitors."

Doña Margarita was silent for a moment. With the last words, her silvery voice had grown hoarse, and I thought she would burst out weeping. It may have been imagination but it seemed to me that those madonna-like eyes, so pure and beautiful, were brimming with tears. She kept her head bent over her embroidery and I could not be certain. Minutes passed. Then the Queen sighed and lifted her white forehead, pale as the moon under the waves of parted hair.

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"Bradomín," she said, "it is for you, the loyal ones, to save the King."

"Señora," I answered with deep feeling, "I stand ready to shed all my blood that he may place the crown upon his head."

The Queen looked at me with noble emotion: "You misunderstand my words. It is not his crown that I beg you to defend, but his life. It must not be said of the Spanish caballeros that they brought a princess from a foreign land to dress her in widow's weeds. Bradomín, I tell you again, we are surrounded by traitors."

In the silence that fell, we heard the rain on the window-panes and the distant call of bugles. Three ladies formed the circle of the Señora, Doña Juana Pacheco, Doña Manuela Ozores and Maria Antonieta Volfani. The latter had accompanied the Queen to Spain. From the time I entered the room I had felt the Volfani's eyes playing over me like an amorous magnet. Now she took advantage of the silence to rise and approach the Queen: "Does the Señora wish me to go for the Prince and Princess?"

"Are their lessons over?" the Queen inquired.

"It is time."

"Bring them then, and Bradomín can make their acquaintance."

I bowed low before the Queen and, profiting by the opportunity, bent in salutation to Maria Antonieta also. Very much mistress of herself, she responded with some insignificant words that I do not now remember, but there was a look in her ardent black eyes that made my heart beat as it used to do when I was twenty. As she went out, the Señora said to me: "I feel anxious about Maria Antonieta. For some time past she has seemed so sad. I fear she may have the same illness that her sisters had. They both died of con-

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sumption; and the poor thing is not very happy with her husband."

The Queen stuck her needle into a little cushion of red damask that lay in her silver work-box and held out the scapular to me with a smile: "There! It is a gift I make you, Bradomín."

I approached to receive it from the royal hands. The Queen presented it with the words: "May it ever guard you from the bullets of the enemy."

And Doña Juana Pacheco and Doña Manuela Ozores, elderly ladies who remembered the Seven Years' War, murmured: "Amen!"

There was another silence. Suddenly the Queen's eyes brightened happily as her two elder children, conducted by Maria Antonieta, entered the room. They ran to her, hung on her neck and kissed her. Doña Margarita said to them with a gentle severity: "Who knew the lessons best?"

The Infanta blushed and said nothing, but Don Jaime, more courageous, answered: "We knew them equally well."

"That means that neither of you knew them."

And Doña Margarita kissed them to hide a laugh. Then she stretched a delicate white hand toward me: "This caballero is the Marquis de Bradomín."

Leaning her head on her mother's shoulder, the Infanta asked softly: "The one who fought the war in Mexico?"

The Queen stroked her daughter's hair. "Who told you of that?"

"Maria Antonieta told me about it once."

"How well you remember!"

The child came shyly over to me with eyes full of curiosity. "Marquis, is that the uniform you wore in Mexico?"

At this, Don Jaime, standing beside his mother, exclaimed

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in the authoritative tone of an eldest son: "Silly! You never know uniforms. That is the pontifical guard's uniform, like Uncle Alfonso's."

With easy courtesy, the Prince came over to me too: "Marquis, is it true that in Mexico the horses can go all day at a gallop without getting tired?"

"It is true, Your Highness."

"And is it true," the Infanta questioned in turn, "that there are snakes there called crystal snakes?"

"That is true also, Your Highness."

The children thought in silence for a moment. Then their mother said: "Tell Bradomín what you are studying."

The Prince drew himself up before me, childishly boastful.

"Marquis, ask me anything you wish about the history of Spain."

I smiled: "What kings have there been of your name, Your Highness?"

"Only one, Don Jaime el Conquistador."

"And of what was he King?"

"Of Spain."

The Infanta murmured with a blush: "Of the Kingdom of Aragon. Wasn't it, Marquis?"

"And isn't that Spain?" the Prince said, glancing at her scornfully. The Infanta sought courage in my eyes and answered with timid seriousness: "But it's not the whole of Spain."

And she blushed again. She was an enchanting child, with eyes sparkling with life and a mass of curls that caressed her velvety cheeks.

With great animation she questioned me further about my travels: "Marquis, is it true you have also been to the Holy Land?"

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"Yes, I have been there too, Your Highness."

"Did you see the sepulchre of Our Lord? What is it like? Tell me." And she settled herself on her straight-backed chair to listen, her elbows on her knees and her face between hands that were lost in a mass of curls. Doña Manuela Ozores and Doña Juana Pacheco also seemed disposed to listen to my narrative and stopped the conversation they had been carrying on in lowered voices. . . .

So the hour of penance arrived and was fulfilled at the royal dinner table, according to the prophecy of his lordship.

—❧ VIII ❧—

That night I had the honour of being one of the Queen's circle. All the evening I sought in vain for an opportunity to talk with Maria Antonieta alone. I left with an uneasy feeling that she had intentionally avoided me. As the cold night air struck my face, I became aware of a tall shadow of gigantic proportions coming toward me. It was Fray Ambrosio.

"Our sovereigns have been most kind. The Marquis de Bradomín cannot complain!"

I answered stiffly: "The King is aware that he has no more loyal servitor."

The friar, stiff in his turn, murmured: "He has one other. . . ."

I felt my pride rise: "None."

We walked in silence until we turned a corner where a lantern hung. The monk stopped suddenly: "But where are we going? The lady who has already been mentioned says she would like you to see her to-night if possible."

I felt my heart beat fast: "Where?"

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"At her house. But we shall have to enter with great caution. I will guide you."

We retraced our steps through the wet, deserted street. The friar spoke in a low voice: "The Condesa has just left the Queen too. She told me, this morning, that I was to wait for her. Undoubtedly this advice was for the Señor Marquis. She was afraid that she would not have an opportunity to speak with him in the royal residence."

The monk paused with a sigh, then laughed aloud, a strange, grotesque laugh: "Bless my soul!"

"What is wrong with you, Fray Ambrosio?"

"Nothing, Señor Marquis. . . . Joy at finding myself engaged on such a mission, so worthy of an old soldier. Ah, how my seventeen wounds are laughing. . . ."

"You have them well counted, your seventeen wounds."

"They were even better acquired, Señor Marquis."

He was silent, doubtless expecting an answer from me. When he did not obtain it, he continued in the same tone of bitter mockery: "Indeed, yes. No office can equal that of chaplain to the Condesa de Volfani. A pity she can't fulfil her promises better. The fault is not with her, she tells me, but with the Royal House. They are enemies of the factious clergy there, and she must not offend them. Oh, if it depended solely upon my illustrious patron, why . . ."

I would not let him continue. I stopped in my walk. "Fray Ambrosio," I said with great firmness, "my patience is at an end. I will not tolerate another word."

He bowed his head: "So be it."

We walked on in silence through the streets. Lamps, stationed at long intervals, threw dancing shadows across the darkness. From the houses where the troops were quartered came strong young voices singing the *jota* with the flourish

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of guitars. Then silence again, only disturbed by the watchword of a sentinel or the bark of a dog. We entered under a portico, walking cautiously in the shadow. Fray Ambrosio led the way. At the sound of his steps a door opened softly and the monk turned and beckoned with his hand as he disappeared into the great hall. As I entered behind him I heard his voice say: "May we light a candle?"

Another voice, a woman's, answered from the shadow: "Yes, Señor."

Some one had closed the door. Lost in the darkness, I waited while the monk lighted a twisted taper. The burning wax filled the place with a smell of the church. As the livid light flickered in the great hall, its pale glow fell upon the monk's trembling head. A shadow approached. It was Maria Antonieta's maid. The monk handed her the candle and drew me to a corner. I divined rather than saw the violent trembling of the tonsured head.

"Señor Marquis, here I quit this office of go-between. It is unworthy of me."

His skeleton hand fastened its bones into my shoulder.

"The time has arrived for me to gather the fruit, Señor Marquis. Hand me over one hundred *onzas*. If you haven't that sum with you, beg it of the Condesa. After all, she made me such an offer herself."

Although completely surprised, I controlled myself. Stepping backward I placed a hand upon my sword.

"You have chosen an unhappy method, Fray Ambrosio. One does not beg from me with threats. Nor am I to be frightened by fierce looks."

The monk's laugh was a grotesque jeer: "Better not raise your voice; the patrol is passing and might hear us."

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

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"I have never been afraid. . . . But possibly, just now, taking you for the Condesa's lover . . ."

I understood the malicious intent of the monk. In a voice hoarse with restrained rage, I said, "It's a despicable ambush!"

"A strategem of war, Señor Marquis. The lion is in the trap."

"Vile monk, I am tempted to run you through with my sword."

The monk spread open his long skeleton arms, baring his breast. His voice had a frightened sound: "Strike! My dead body will speak for me."

"Enough."

"Will you give me the money?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

For a moment he was silent. Then, in a timid tone that yet had a certain note of grimness, he insisted: "It must be now."

"Is my word not sufficient?"

He answered almost humbly: "I do not doubt your word, but it must be now. I want to leave Estella to-night. This money is not for me; I am no robber. I must have it to take the field for Don Carlos. I will give you a receipt. I have been under promise to my men for a long time and I had to take some definite step. Fray Ambrosio does not go back upon his word."

"This money," I said sorrowfully, "why did you not ask for it in friendship?"

The monk sighed: "It was lack of courage. I do not know how to beg. It fills me with shame. Sooner than beg, I

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could kill. Not from wicked instinct but from shame."

His voice broke suddenly and he flung himself into the street, regardless of the rain which was falling in torrents. The maid, shaking with fright, led me to the room where her mistress was awaiting me.

—❧ IX ❧—

Maria Antonietta had just come in and was sitting, with hands crossed, in front of a brazier. The bent head was an unruly mass of waves from the damp of the fog. When I entered, she lifted sad dark eyes, encircled by violet shadows: "Why this insistence on coming to-night?"

Wounded by the harshness of her words, I stopped short in the middle of the room: "I'm sorry, but that was an invention of your chaplain."

"He was lying in wait for me when I came in by your orders."

"By my orders?"

I said nothing more, resigning myself to suffer reproach rather than to tell her ungallantly that Fray Ambrosio's stratagem had brought me there. There were no tears in Maria Antonietta's eyes as she talked, but her voice was hoarse: "So eager to see me now, and not one letter while you were away! You say nothing. What is it you want?"

"I want you, Maria Antonietta," I answered, hoping to appease her. Her eyes, beautiful and mysterious, glowed with scorn: "You are resolved to compromise me so that the Queen will send me away from her. You are my executioner."

I smiled.

"Your victim," I answered, seizing her hands with the intention of kissing them. But she proudly drew them away.

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Maria Antonieta suffered from what the ancients called the sacred evil; but since, with the blood of a courtesan, she possessed the spirit of a saint, she would now and then forswear love in the winter time. Poor creature! She belonged to that admirable race of women who, when they reach old age, edify others not only by the saintliness of their present lives but by vague legends of their early transgressions as well.

She sat gloomily silent with her eyes fixed obdurately on space. I seized her hands again and held them between my own, not attempting to kiss them for fear she would again withdraw them.

"Maria Antonieta!" I begged in a soft, lover-like voice.

She remained silent. After a moment I repeated: "Maria Antonieta!"

She turned and drew her hands away, answering coldly: "What do you wish?"

"To know your troubles."

"Why?"

"To console you."

She suddenly lost her look of a high priestess and, turning toward me, burst out wildly and passionately: "Count your own ingritudes. They are my troubles!"

The flame of love burned in her eyes with a sombre fire that seemed to consume her. They were eyes full of mysticism like those one sometimes divines beneath the head-dress of a nun. She spoke in a voice hoarse with emotion: "My husband is coming here to serve as aide-de-camp to the King."

"Where has he been?"

"With the Infante, Don Alfonso."

"That is rather annoying."

"It is worse than annoying, for I shall have to live with

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him. The Queen insists upon it. And rather than that, I would go back to Italy. You say nothing?"

"I can do no otherwise than respect your wish."

She looked at me with an intensity of emotion: "Would you have me divide myself between you two? God, I wish I were old—old and decrepit!"

In my gratification I kissed the hands of my adorable mistress. I have never felt jealous of husbands, and these scruples lent an added thrill of enchantment, possibly the greatest that Maria Antonietta could afford me. One does not come to be old without having learned that blood and tears and remorse enhance the delights of love. They are the perfumes poured out by Aphrodite, sacred goddess who exalts the pleasures of earth, mother of our divinest sorrows, mother of the world.

How many times that night I felt Maria Antonietta's tears on my face. I still remember the sweetness of the lamentation she breathed into my ear with quivering lips: "I ought not to love you. . . . I ought to strangle you in my arms, like this, like this. . . ."

"Your arms are the perfect rope," I sighed.

She clasped me still closer, moaning: "Oh, how I love you. Why do I love you so? You have cast some spell over me. I am mad for you! Say something! Say something!"

"I would rather listen to you."

"But I want you to say something."

"I can only say what you already know. . . . I am dying for you!"

Maria Antonietta kissed me again. Smiling and flushed she murmured in a low voice: "The night is very long. . . ."

"Absence was much longer."

"How unfaithful you have been to me!"

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"I shall prove to you the contrary." Still flushed and laughing she answered: "Mind what you say."

"You shall see."

"Take care, I shall be very exigent."

I confess that at this I trembled. My nights were no longer the triumphant epics of those tropic nights perfumed by the passion of Niña Chole.

Maria Antonieta freed herself from my arms and went into her bedroom. I waited some time and then I followed her. I saw her fly at my footstep and hide herself, all white, between the curtains of the bed. It was an ancient bed of polished walnut, the classic nuptial couch on which the noble spouses of Navarre had slept to old age, chaste Christians, ignorant of that science of voluptuousness which delighted the perverse and slightly theological mind of my master, Aretino.

Maria Antonieta was as exigent as a doge's lady; I was as wise as an old cardinal of the Renaissance who had learned the secrets of the art of love from the confessional. Almost swooning, she breathed: "Xavier, it is the last time."

I thought she was speaking of the history of our love, and feeling myself capable of further manifestations I sighed and excited the tip of her breast with a kiss of well-simulated ardour. She sighed too, as she crossed her bare arms and laid her hands upon her shoulders in the attitude of a repentant saint.

"Xavier, when shall we see each other again?"

"To-morrow."

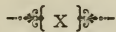
"No. To-morrow my calvary begins."

She was silent for a moment. Then she threw her arms in a loving knot around my neck and whispered: "The Queen insists on a reconciliation with my husband, but I swear it

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shall never be. I will defend myself by saying I am ill."

Maria Antonietta's ill was the sacred evil of old. That night she moaned in my arms like a sylvan nymph. Divine Maria Antonietta was inordinately passionate, and one can always deceive a passionate woman. God, who knows all things, knows that not they but the languid, sighing creatures who are more jealous of making their lovers feel than of feeling themselves are the formidable ones. Maria Antonietta was as naïvely self-seeking as a child; in her transports she was quite oblivious of me. At those moments, with eyes misted over, burning red lips parted to reveal the gleam of white teeth and palpitating breasts as soft as two white doves, she was incomparably beautiful, with a sensual, fecund, sacred beauty.



It was not yet dawn when I parted from Maria Antonietta; the bugles were just sounding reveille. Over the snow-covered city the moonlight fell doleful and sepulchral. Not knowing where to seek for a lodging at such an hour, I wandered about the streets with no definite object, till at last I came to the plaza where Fray Ambrosio lived. I stopped under the wooden balcony to take refuge from the rain which was beginning anew, and presently I noticed that the door was not fastened; the wind was swinging it slowly to and fro. The night was so stormy that, without stopping to think, I determined to go in. I groped in the dark for the stairs while the wolfhound barked at me ferociously, rattling the chain that tied him. Fray Ambrosio loomed at the head of the staircase holding a light. His long thin body was absurdly garbed in an abbreviated cassock and he wore on his shaking head a black knitted cap that gave the whole figure the look

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of a grotesque astrologer. With a forbidding expression on my face I walked in without speaking. The monk followed me, holding the light high to illuminate the hall. From within came a muffled sound of voices and the chinking of money. Assembled in the room were a number of men at play, with their hats on and their cloaks flung back to leave the shoulders free; the shaven chins indicated clearly that they belonged to the clergy. A jaundiced-looking youth, with hawk-like nose, held the pack, and as I entered he was laying the cards out on the table for a new game: "Make your bets."

There was a confused babble of ecclesiastical voices as they followed his direction; then Miquelcho's voice was heard admonishing them severely. "You all pounce on one card like wolves."

A toothless, spectacled old priest replied, soothingly, in a voice evangelically calm: "Never mind, Miquelcho!"

And other voices, secretive as the confessional, murmured like a litany: "Draw, Miquelcho. . . . What luck now. . . . We'll soon see. . . ."

Miquelcho began to draw; there was a strained silence. Several of the players raised furtive eyes, swept me with a rapid glance and turned their attention to the cards again. Fray Ambrosio called Miquelcho over with a look as he said to me: "Señor Marquis, don't remind me of what happened to-night; for the sake of the Blessed Virgin do not remind me of it. I had been drinking the whole afternoon to bring myself to the point."

He still mumbled confusedly as the seminarist dropped the cards and came over to join us; he pressed a gnarled hand on the student's shoulder and said with a sigh: "The fault is all with this fellow here. I am taking him with me as my second in command."

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Miquelcho's colour mounted like a girl's, but he fixed audacious eyes upon me as he said: "Money must be taken where it can be found. Fray Ambrosio has told me of his friend and patron's great generosity."

The monk opened his fawning black mouth: "Great indeed!" he answered with crude flattery. "In that, as in everything, he is the first caballero of Spain."

Some of the card-players were staring at us with curiosity. Miquelcho walked over, picked up the cards again and began to shuffle. When he had finished, the old spectacled priest said: "Cut, Don Quintiliano."

And Don Quintiliano, as he cut the pack with a tremulous hand, remarked, smiling: "Beware, I never give good luck."

Miquelcho dealt the cards out on the table again and, coming back to me, said: "I don't ask you to play, for there's such a contemptible sum to be got out of it."

And the old priest in the spectacles, evangelical as ever, added: "All of us here are poor."

Another murmured sententiously: "Here you can only win a pittance, but you can lose a fortune."

Miquelcho saw me waver; he got up and pressed the cards upon me while the priests made room for me around the table. Smiling, I turned to the monk: "Fray Ambrosio, it looks as if the money for your troops might stay here."

"God will not suffer that! The game shall end now."

And with one puff the monk blew out the lamp. The light of dawn filtered through the windows, and above the hollow trot of hoofs on the plaza pavement came the clear notes of a bugle. It was a patrol of Bourbon Lancers.

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—❧ XI ❧—

In spite of the storm of wind and snow, Don Carlos determined to take the field. They told me that for a long time he had only been waiting for the Bourbon cavalry to arrive—three hundred veteran lancers who were later to prove themselves entitled to the name of El Cid. The Conde de Volfani, who had brought the troop, was an aide-de-camp of the King. On seeing each other we both evinced great pleasure, for, as might be supposed, we were very good friends. We rode at the head of the cavalry with the bugles sounding and the horses' manes lifting in the wind. The people were congregated in the streets, shouting enthusiastically: "Viva Carlos VII."

In the narrow windows, under the dark eaves, one saw an occasional old woman holding the iron fastenings with withered hands as she called out in almost angry tones: "Long live the King of Good Christians!" And the lusty voice of the populace responded: "Viva!"

We halted for a moment in the middle of the street. A savage wind from the mountains, icily tempestuous, beat against us, lashed the fluttering ponchos and pressed back caps from brown foreheads with a fury that had something of tragic beauty. Horses reared and neighed and every one shifted to a firmer seat in his saddle. Then the whole column began to move.

The road wound between hills crowned with solitary houses. The rain continued to beat upon us in great gusts; a halt was ordered at the village of Zabalcín. The King and his staff were quartered in a great rambling house that stood at the crossing of two bad roads, one for wheeled vehicles and the other a bridle-path. As soon as we had dismounted, we

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gathered around the fire in the kitchen, and the woman of the house ran and brought the grandfather's high-backed chair and offered it to the King, Don Carlos. There was no cessation of the rain which beat with a noisy lash against the window-panes, and we were all lamenting the tempestuous weather that prevented us from inflicting the desired punishment on the Alfonsine faction, now occupying the road to Oteiza. Fortunately, towards evening the weather grew calmer. Don Carlos spoke to me apart: "Bradomín, how shall we keep from being bored?"

"Señor," I permitted myself to reply, "since the women here are old, I suggest that we say a rosary."

The King looked me in the eyes with a mocking expression.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "Recite us the sonnet you composed to our cousin Alfonso. Get up on this chair."

There was general laughter from the gentlemen of his suite. I looked at them in silence for a moment, then bowed before the King and spoke: "Señor, the estate to which I was born is high for playing the buffoon."

At first Don Carlos hesitated. Then, his course determined, he came to me smiling and put his arms around me: "Bradomín, I had no wish to offend you. You understand that."

"I understand it, Señor, but I fear that others may not have done so."

The King glanced at his suite and answered with majestic dignity: "You are right."

There was a long silence, only disturbed by the rushing of the wind without and the whisper of the flames in the chimney. Shadows began to invade the kitchen, but through the mournful window-panes it could be seen that daylight still

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lingered in the fields. The two bad roads wound out of sight between hills of frowning rock. At that hour both were deserted. Don Carlos was standing by a window and called me with a mysterious air.

"Bradomín, you and Volfani are to accompany me. We go to Estella. It is unnecessary that any one else should know of it."

Suppressing a smile, I asked: "Do you wish me to inform Volfani, Señor?"

"Volfani is already informed. It was he who arranged the entertainment."

I bowed with a murmured eulogy of my friend: "Señor, your appreciation of the Count's great talents fills me with admiration."

As if to show disapproval of my words the King made no answer. Then he opened the window; the moon showed faintly in a clouded sky; he stretched out his hand.

"It is not raining," he said.

Volfani arrived shortly afterward: "All is ready, Señor."

"We will wait till night falls," the King answered briefly.

In the obscurity of the kitchen two voices rose and fell. Don Antonio Lizárraga and Don Antonio Dorregaray were discussing the art of war. They were recalling battles won and hoping for new triumphs. Dorregaray, in speaking of the soldiers, was moved to tenderness. He praised the serene courage of the Castilians, the bravery of the Catalans and the aggressiveness of the soldiers of Navarre. Suddenly an authoritative voice interrupted him: "The soldiers of Navarre are the best soldiers in the world."

And from the opposite side of the fire the bent figure of old General Aguirre slowly raised itself. The ruddy glow of the flames trembled over his wrinkled face; his eyes, under

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frowning white brows, were shot with youthful fire. Emotionally affected as a child, he went on in a shaking voice: "Navarre is the true Spain. Here they preserve the loyalty, faith, heroism, of the time when we were great."

Tears were in his voice. The old soldier of a past war belonged himself to a past generation.

I must confess admiration for those ingenuous spirits who still hope to see the happiness of peoples spring from the stern old virtues. I admire them and pity them, for in their blindness to all lights they will never learn that peoples, like women, are only happy in forgetting what is known as duty for the egoistic instinct of the future, the self-impulse which is above good and evil, triumphant even over death. But a day must come when the living will realise the harshness of a precept that condemns the unborn, and a race of wise men will appear and place a cap and bells upon that yellowed skull which filled the anchorite with gloomy meditation. A race of wise men who will break the universal law, the supreme law which unites the ant with the stars, and refusing to bring forth life, will prepare with gaiety for the millennium of death. Would not this, with the coronation of Sappho and Ganymede, be a most diverting way to end the world!

Night had fallen and moonlight was shining on the casement. Through the open window a cold damp wind blew in, flattening the flames on the hearth and making them spring higher. Don Carlos made a sign for us to follow him and we went out. After walking some distance we came to a place sheltered by heavy rocks where a soldier was waiting with our horses. The King mounted and raced off at a gallop; we followed. As we came upon the guard, a voice in the night called out: "Who goes there?"

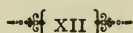
The soldier answered with a cry: "Carlos VII."

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“What people?”

“Bourbon.”

And we were allowed to pass. In the silence of the night there came from the close-lying mountains the noise of rushing torrents. The great rocks that flanked the highroad seemed full of menace. At the gates of the city we entrusted our horses to the soldier and proceeded stealthily on foot.



We stopped in front of a pretentious house with grated windows, the home of my beauteous dancer, now exalted as the Duquesa de Uclés. A cautious knock and the door swung open. The great iron lantern was lighted and a man clumped ahead of us on a wooden leg opening doors and leaving them thrown wide after we had passed. More than once this man stared at me curiously and I stared back at him, trying to recognise him. He was tall and spare, with the dark, shrivelled skin and bright eyes of a gipsy and the profile and bald head of Cæsar. All at once my memory cleared at the pompous gesture with which, from time to time, he fondled the locks of hair above his ears. The Cæsar of the wooden leg was a celebrated bull-fighter, an extravagant dandy in his day, well-known in the gay world of beauty and gilded youth. Later, it was rumoured, he had taken my place in the heart of the captivating dancer. I had never tried to verify the rumour, for I have always felt it a chivalric duty to respect these little secrets of the feminine heart.

With what profound melancholy I recalled those happy days of the past! They seemed to rise again before me at the dry tap of the wooden leg as we passed through vast corridors the walls of which unfolded the amorous history of

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Doña Marina and Hernán Cortés. My heart was still beating fast when, in an open doorway, the Duchess appeared.

"Has she come?" Don Carlos asked.

"She will be here soon, Señor."

The Duchess stood aside to make way for the King, but he gallantly refused to pass: "Ladies first."

The candelabra on the consoles lighted the salon dimly. It was large and cold with a highly polished floor. A copper brazier, held by lions' claws, burned in front of a wide sofa. As he stretched his hands above the coals, Don Carlos murmured: "Women know nothing but the art of keeping one waiting. It's their greatest talent."

After this he became silent and we respected his silence. The Duchess gave me a smile. Seeing her deep mourning, I at once recalled the lady with the black veil who had left the church in the Queen's train.

The tap of the wooden leg sounded again, coming along the corridor, and then there was a murmur of voices. After a moment, two women entered, closely muffled and rather breathless, damp vapour steaming from their cloaks. When they caught sight of us, one of them drew back to the door in manifest annoyance. Don Carlos walked over, and after a few words in an undertone they went out together. The other, the duenna, with a cat-like step, moved after them. In a few moments she came back and motioned furtively to Volfani, her hand barely visible under the folds of her cloak. Volfani got up and followed her. When we were alone, the Duchess laughed and said in an undertone: "They're hiding from you."

"Do I know them?"

"I don't know. Don't ask me anything."

I felt no curiosity, so I said no more, but I tried to kiss

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the noble hands of my old flame. She drew them away with a smile: "Be sensible. You know we're both old people now."

"Carmen, you are eternally young."

She looked at me an instant and replied with mischievous cruelty: "Well, the same cannot be said of you."

Then, being really good, she tried to staunch the wound by throwing her scarf around my neck and offering her lips as a reparation. Divine lips that dispelled with the perfume of prayer the well-remembered perfume of Andalusian dances. She drew back quickly as the tap of the wooden leg reverberated once more through the house.

"What do you fear?" I asked smiling.

Wrinkling her pretty forehead in a frown, she replied: "Nothing! Do you, too, believe this calumny?"

She formed a cross with her fingers and touched it to her lips with more of gipsy cajolery than of devotion: "I swear to you that there has never been anything between us. We both were from the same place and I was fond of him; so when a bull left him helpless and unable to earn his bread, I took him in from charity. You would have done the same thing."

Although I was not quite sure of this, I agreed solemnly: "The very same."

The Duchess, as if trying to blot this memory out completely, now became tenderly reproachful: "You haven't even asked about our daughter."

For a moment, scarcely remembering, I was confused. Then my heart placed the proper excuse upon my lips: "I did not dare."

"Why?"

"I was loath to speak of her, coming, as I have, on an intrigue with the King."

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The mother's eyes clouded with sadness: "I do not keep her with me here. She is in a convent."

All at once, I felt a touch of love for that far-away, chimerical daughter.

"Does she look like you?"

"Oh, no. She's a plain little creature."

I was afraid she was mocking me, so I laughed: "But is she really my daughter?"

The Duquesa de Uclés kissed her crossed fingers again in solemn affirmation, and although it may have been due to my emotion it seemed to me that this time there was none of the gipsy cajolery in her oath. Fixing her big dark eyes on me, she said with a deeply affecting charm, the appealing charm that one feels in a gipsy ballad: "The poor child is as much your daughter as mine. I have never disguised the fact, not even to my husband. And how fond he was of her, dear man!"

She dried a tear. She had been a widow since the beginning of the war, when the pacific Duque de Uclés had obscurely died. The former dancer lived up to tradition, like a great lady, and had ruined herself for the Cause. She had borne the cost of horses and arms for a hundred men, a hundred lancers named for Don Jaime. In speaking of Don Carlos' heir, she softened as if she were speaking of her own son: "So you have seen my precious prince?"

"Yes."

"And which of the Infantas?"

"Doña Blanca."

"A gay little gipsy, isn't she? She will be very fascinating."

The flutter of this gracious prophecy was still in the air

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when we heard the King's voice. The Duquesa rose to her feet: "What is that?"

Don Carlos entered, looking pale. We stared at him with questioning eyes.

"Volfani has had a stroke," he said. "The ladies had gone and I was talking with him when all at once I saw him sway a little and suddenly crumple up over the arm of a chair. I had to hold him . . ."

As he said this, he hurried out again and we followed him in obedience to the order which he had not stopped to formulate. We found Volfani in collapse in a chair, abject and lifeless, with his head hanging down. Don Carlos went over and lifted him in his strong arms to a more comfortable position.

"How do you feel, Volfani?"

Volfani made visible efforts to reply but was unable to do so. Threads of saliva trickled from the inert, drooping mouth; the Duquesa, with the noble charity of a Veronica, hastened to wipe them away. Volfani gazed up at us with a look of mortal sadness. The Duquesa, courageous as women are in such crises, attempted to comfort him:

"It's nothing, Señor Conde. My husband, who was rather stout, once . . ."

Volfani moved one of his hanging arms and from his lips came a snoring sound in which a resemblance to words was vaguely distinguishable. We exchanged glances, believing that he was dying. The snoring sound, with its accompanying froth of saliva, came again from Volfani's lips. Two tears sprang from the glazed eyes and ran down the wax-like cheeks. Don Carlos talked to him as if he were a child, his voice tenderly commanding: "You're going to be taken home. Would you like to have Bradomín go with you?"

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Volfani could not utter a word. The King took us apart and the three of us talked privately together. First, as became magnanimous Christian hearts, we lamented poor Maria Antonieta's grief; then we predicted poor Volfani's death; and lastly it was resolved that he must be moved in a manner to avoid comment. The Duquesa warned us, and we agreed, that he could not be taken by servants of her household. After some little doubt, it was finally decided to entrust the matter to Rafael el Rondeño. When the Cæsar of the wooden leg was put in possession of the facts, he fondled his ear-locks and lisped out: "But are you sure that his condition is not due to wine?"

The Duquesa was righteously indignant and bade him be silent. Cæsar impassively continued to fondle his ear-locks. At length he faced us, his arrangements settled. Two sergeants, who were quartered in the garret, would take charge of the Conde's body; they were men who could be trusted, veterans of the Fifth Navarre. They would carry him into the house as if they had found him in the road. He ended his exposition with a word which, like a flower, held all the perfume of the boastful days when he was a killer of bulls: "Hace!"



We returned to the place where we had left the horses. The King did not attempt to disguise his sorrow. With a fixed frown on his brow he kept repeating: "Poor Volfani! A loyal heart!"

For some time we rode on in a silence only broken by the sound of the horses' hoofs. A bright winter moon shone on the snowy wastes of Monte Jurra. A cold, gusty wind beat in our faces. Don Carlos spoke and the blast scattered his

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words—I could hardly understand him: “Do you think he will die?”

Shaping my hand to carry the sound, I shouted: “I fear it, Señor!”

And a thick, formless echo repeated my words.

Don Carlos did not speak again during the journey. We dismounted under shelter of the high rocks near the house and, throwing the reins to a soldier who accompanied us, we proceeded on foot. We stopped at the door a moment to study the black clouds which the wind was chasing across the moon.

“Cursed weather!” Don Carlos muttered.

He cast a final glance at the grim sky which seemed to threaten a blizzard and went in. As we crossed the threshold, we heard a sound of voices in dispute.

“It is nothing, Señor,” I reassured the King. “They are gambling.”

Don Carlos smiled indulgently: “Do you know who they are?”

“I can guess, Señor. Your entire suite.”

We had entered the King’s private apartment. On the table stood a lighted lamp; the bed was covered with a rich moleskin rug; a brazier, placed between two camp-chairs, burned with a ruddy glow. Don Carlos sat down: “Bradomin,” he said, slightly ironical, “some one spoke of you with horror this evening—said your friendship was a misfortune—besought me to exile you from my presence.”

“Was it a lady, Señor?” I answered, smiling.

“A lady who does not know you. But she tells me that her grandmother believed you to be the wickedest of men and always spoke of you with malediction.”

Feeling a vague apprehension, I asked: “Who was her grandmother, Señor?”

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“A Roman princess.”

I sat in startled silence. The saddest memory of my life rose before me and pierced my soul with a mortal chill; I went from the room with my spirit shrouded in mourning. That hatred, transmitted from grandmother to grand-daughter, brought back to me the one great love of my life which fate had destined should be lost forever. I remembered sadly those years of my youth which I spent on Italian soil, the days when I served in the Noble Guard of His Holiness the Pope. It was then, in the dawn of a spring day, with the sound of church-bells trembling in the air and the perfume of newly-opened roses sweet over all, that I arrived in the ancient pontifical city and came to the Palace where a noble Princess received me, surrounded by her daughters as in a Court of Love. My soul brimmed over with that memory. All of that tumultuous, fruitless past came pouring over me to drown me in its bitter waters.

Seeking to be alone, I went out into the garden; for a long time I walked in the quiet night, parading my solitude and sadness under the same pale moon that long ago had witnessed the loves and glories of my youth. I could hear the noise of swollen torrents rushing headlong from the mountains. I compared them with my life, at times flooded with passion and again a river-bed, burned dry. As the moon failed to dissipate my gloomy thoughts, I realised that forgetfulness must be sought elsewhere. With a sigh of resignation I joined my good friends of the royal suite. Ah! Sad it is to confess, but the white moon offers the disconsolate less solace than a game of chance.

With the first cock-crow the bugles sounded reveille and there was nothing for it but to pocket my gains and sink once more into sentimental meditation. Before long an aide-de-

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camp came to tell me that the King summoned me. I found the Señor in his room, wearing his spurs and with the sword at his side. He was sipping a cup of coffee.

“Bradomín, I am with you now.”

“At your service, Señor.”

The King swallowed the last drop and, setting down the cup, led me over to a window: “It seems that another of the factious clergy has come out for us. A brave man and a loyal one, they tell me, but fanatical—the priest of Orió.”

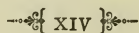
“An emulator of Santa Cruz?” I asked.

“No. A poor old fellow for whom the years have stood still and who believes in waging war as they did in my grandfather’s time. I hear he is planning to burn at the stake, as heretics, two Russian travellers, two inoffensive simpletons in all probability. I want you to have an interview with him and make him understand that times have changed. Tell him he had better return to his church and hand the prisoners over to you. As you know, I have no desire to irritate Russia.”

“And what shall I do if his head is inordinately obstinate?”

Don Carlos’ smile was majestic: “Break it.”

He left me to receive a courier who had arrived. I stayed where I was, expecting a last word. Don Carlos raised his eyes from the dispatch he was reading and gave me one of his kindest looks, noble, serene and sorrowful, the look of a great king.



I went out, and a moment after mounted and rode off with my escort of ten Bourbon Lancers. We made no halt till we reached San Pelayo de Ariza. There I learned that an Alfonsine faction had cut the bridge of Omellín. I asked if the river could be crossed and they told me no; the ford

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was impassable on account of the flood, and the wherry had been burned. We would have to turn back and follow the road over the mountains to cross the river by the bridge of Arnáiz. I wanted, above everything, to accomplish the mission I had undertaken, and I did not hesitate, even though I suspected that route to be filled with danger. My suspicion was emphatically confirmed by our guide, an old peasant with three sons in the armies of Don Carlos.

Before starting upon this journey, we rode the horses down into the river to drink. When I saw the other bank so near, I was tempted to take a chance. I consulted with my men; some of them seemed resolute enough but others were dubious. I put an end to the discussion by walking my horse out into the river; the animal was timorous and shook his ears. He was already swimming, in water up to his girth, when an old woman, carrying a load of wood, appeared on the other bank, calling out something. At first I fancied she was warning us of the danger of the crossing. When I reached midstream I could hear her better: "Stop, my sons! For the love of God, do not cross. The whole country is covered with black Alfonsists . . .!"

She threw her bundle of wood to the ground and descended till her wooden shoes were in the water. With arms lifted on high, a peasant prophetess, stern and despairing, she vociferated: "God is trying us, to prove the faith each holds in his heart. He would learn the strength of our good conscience. Everywhere, my sons, they are saying that a great battle has been won against us. Abuíñ, Tafal, Endrás, Otáiz, all to the black ones!"

I turned to see the effect of this upon my men and found that they were timidly retreating. At the same instant I heard shots and saw in the water the circles of bullets falling

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around me. I made haste to regain the bank; just as my horse rose to set his hoofs into the sand, a bullet struck my left arm and I felt the hot blood run over my benumbed fingers. Bent over their saddle-bows, my lancers were mounting at a gallop a slope that was covered with wet evergreen shrubs.

With the horses in a lather of sweat, we entered the village. I had them summon a local quack who tied up my arm in four pieces of cane, and with no further rest nor any other precaution I, with my ten lancers, took the mountain road. The guide, who travelled on foot at my horse's bridle, prophesied new perils at every moment.

The suffering caused by my wounded arm was intense. My eyes blazed with fever; my face was wax-like; a dark beard had grown in a few hours, as it sometimes does on a corpse. The soldiers of my escort looked at me in silent sympathy. Blinded with pain, I abandoned the reins on the saddle-bow and let my horse travel unguided; as we passed through the village it almost ran down two women pedestrians. They screamed and drew back, looking at me with frightened eyes. One of the women recognised me.

"Marquis!"

I turned with an expression of suffering indifference: "What is it, Señora?"

"Don't you remember me?"

And she came closer, partially uncovering her head over which she wore the mantilla of rural Navarre. I saw a wrinkled face full of vigour and a pair of honest black eyes. I tried to recall her: "You are . . . ?" And I hesitated.

She hastened to my aid: "Sister Simona, Marquis. I can't believe you don't remember me?"

With my mind a blank, I repeated: "Sister Simona. . . ."

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"Why, you've seen me a hundred times when we were on the frontier with the King. But what is the matter? Are you wounded?"

For answer, I showed her my livid hand; it was cold and the nails were turning blue. She examined it a moment and announced with kindly vehemence: "You can't go on in this state, Marquis."

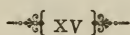
"I have to execute an order of the King," I said weakly.

"Not if you had to execute a hundred orders! I have seen many wounds in this war and I tell you this arm can't wait. The King will have to wait."

And she took the bridle of my horse to turn it from the road. The eager black eyes that looked at me from the brown, wrinkled face were full of tears.

"Follow, boys," she said, turning to the soldiers.

She spoke in a fondly dictatorial tone, like a dowager grandmother. Although the pain had robbed me of all strength, with my customary gallantry I made an attempt to dismount. Sister Simona stopped me with a brusque yet kindly word. I obeyed the nun, all power of will gone. We entered a street of low houses set in small gardens. Smoke curled upward in the peace of twilight, filling the air with the smell of burning pine. The voices of children at play and the angry calls of the mothers came to me as in a dream. The branches of a willow that drooped its boughs over a wall struck me in the face; I bent in the saddle to pass under its wet gloom.



We stopped before a great manor-house with a stone escutcheon above the door and a wide vestibule where the scent of grapes in the air seemed to proclaim a generous

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abundance. The house stood in a grass-grown plaza; through its solitary silence a farrier's hammer sounded and the song of a woman who was patching her petticoat. Sister Simona remarked, as she helped me to dismount: "This is where we have had our retreat since the Republicans burned the Convent of Abarzuza. They were furious at the death of their general."

"What general?" I asked vaguely.

"Don Manuel de la Concha."

Then I remembered having heard, I did not know when or where, that the news of that battle had been brought to Estella by a nun disguised as a peasant. In order to get there early, the nun had walked all night in a terrific storm, and when she arrived they had taken her for a visionary. Sister Simona was that nun. She smiled as she recalled it to me: "Ah! Marquis, I thought they would shoot me that night."

I went up the wide stone stairs leaning upon her shoulder; in front of us went Sister Simona's companion, a young girl with velvety eyes, very tender and sweet. She went on ahead to knock, and the Sister who tended the door opened it with a "Deo Gracias!"

"Thanks be to God!"

"This is our field hospital," Sister Simona said, as we entered a white room with a walnut floor.

Seated on low rush chairs in the twilight, a group of women wearing linen headdresses were soberly engaged in pulling lint and cutting bandages. Sister Simona gave an order: "Have a bed made up in the cell which Don Antonio Dorregaray occupied."

Two nuns, one of them with a great bunch of keys hanging at her waist, rose and went out. Sister Simona, aided by

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the little girl who had been her companion, began to undo the bandages on my arm.

"Let us have a look! Who put these sticks on?"

"A quack at San Pelayo de Ariza."

"God save us! Does it hurt you much?"

"Yes."

When the arm was free from the binding I felt relief and rose to my feet with sudden energy: "Give me a temporary aid so that I may continue my journey."

"Sit down," Sister Simona answered with great tranquillity, "and don't talk nonsense. Tell me what the King's order is. If necessary, I will undertake to execute it myself."

Yielding to the nun's tone, I sat down: "What town is this?"

"Villareal de Navarra."

"How far is it from Amelzu?"

"Six leagues."

I repressed a moan and murmured: "The orders that I carry are for the priest of Orio."

"What are the orders?"

"That he should deliver to me two prisoners. I must have an interview with him to-day."

Sister Simona shook her head: "I tell you, you are not to think of anything so foolish. I will take charge of this myself. What prisoners is he to deliver?"

"Two foreigners whom he proposes to burn as heretics."

The nun laughed appreciatively: "Blessed soul, what a notion!"

I repressed a groan and laughed too. For a moment my eyes looked into the eyes of the girl as she lifted them, frightened and pitying, from my arm. It had turned a sickly yellow with a dark purple hole where the bullet had entered.

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"Maximina," Sister Simona said quietly, "tell them to put linen sheets on the bed for the Marquis."

The girl left the room hurriedly and Sister Simona said: "She was ready to burst into tears. The child is as good as an angel."

I felt the tenderness flooding my soul for that child with the velvety eyes who was so sad and full of pity. My feverish mind began to repeat with obstinate insistence: "A plain little creature! A plain little creature! A plain little creature!"

I got to bed with the aid of a soldier and an old woman servant of the nuns. Sister Simona came in after a while and, seating herself beside my bed, began: "I have given orders for the alcalde to be notified that he must provide quarters for the men you brought. The doctor is coming now; he has just finished his visit to the Santiago ward."

With a weak smile, I assented. Shortly afterwards we heard a man's voice in the corridor, chatting in a colloquial accent, and the sweet tones of the nuns answering him.

"Here he is now," Sister Simona murmured.

More time passed and then the doctor appeared at the door ta-ra-ra-ing a Basque song. He was a red-cheeked, jovial old fellow with an impudent eye and an ingenuous wit. He stopped on the threshold, exclaiming: "What shall I do, take off my cap?"

"No, señor," I murmured weakly.

"Well, then I won't take it off; although it's the Mother Superior who should authorise me not to. . . . Let us see what ails our brave soldier."

With prim courtesy, Sister Simona murmured: "This soldier is the Marquis de Bradomín."

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The old man's merry eyes looked at me attentively: "I know him, by reputation, very well."

He bent down and silently examined my hand. As he started to undo the bandages, he turned: "Sister Simona, will you be good enough to bring the light nearer?"

The nun came forward. The doctor uncovered my arm to the shoulder and slid his fingers along with a slight pressure. He raised his head in surprise: "Doesn't it pain you?"

"Somewhat," I answered in a stifled voice.

"Then shout! I am making the examination precisely to find out where it hurts."

He began again, stopping often to look into my face. As he felt around the bullet-hole he pressed his fingers in with more force: "Does it pain here?"

"Very much."

He pressed harder and there was a scrunch of bone. Something like a shadow passed over the doctor's face and, turning to the nun who stood motionless holding the light, he murmured: "The ulna and the radius are fractured, a compound fracture."

Sister Simona assented with her eyes. The doctor carefully pulled down my sleeve; then, looking straight into my face, he said: "I see you are a brave man."

I smiled sadly and there was a moment of silence. Sister Simona set the light on the table and came back to the bedside. I saw the two faces in shadow, gravely intent. I understood the reason for their silence: "Will it be necessary to amputate my arm?"

Doctor and nun looked at me and I read the sentence in their eyes. My one thought was of the attitude I must henceforth adopt with women to make my disfigurement poetic. Had I but won it splendidly on valour's crimson field! I

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confess that at that moment I envied the divine soldier the glory of his lost arm more than the glory of having written Don Quixote.

While I was meditating these foolish thoughts, the doctor uncovered my arm again and ended by announcing that the gangrene would permit no delay. Sister Simona signalled to him and they withdrew to the other end of the room where they conferred in whispers. Then the nun returned to my bedside: "You must have courage, Marquis."

"I have it, Sister Simona," I murmured.

"Much courage," the good Mother repeated.

I looked at her without flinching and said: "Poor Sister Simona, you don't know how to break it to me!"

The nun made no answer and the vague hope I had still cherished fled as a bird flits away into the twilight; my soul was the nest that the bird had forsaken.

The nun's voice came softly: "We must be patient under the afflictions that God sends."

She moved away with a light step and the doctor came to my bedside. I felt a little mistrustful: "Have you cut off many arms, doctor?" I asked.

He smiled, nodding his head in assent: "Quite a number, quite a number."

Two nuns entered and he left me to help them arrange lint and bandages on a table. I followed the preparations with my eyes, experiencing a kind of cruel, bitter joy which dominated the effeminate feeling of self-pity wakened in me by my misfortune.

Pride, my one great virtue, sustained me. I did not utter a complaint—even when they opened up the flesh, even when they sawed off the bone, even when they sewed up the stump. The last bandage placed, Sister Simona, with a passion of

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sympathy in her eyes, murmured: "I have never seen such bravery!"

And the acolytes who had assisted at the sacrifice also burst into exclamations: "What courage!"

"He stood it bravely!"

"And we thought the General was heroic."

I suspected that they were complimenting me and said weakly: "Thank you, my children."

The doctor was washing the blood from his hands.

"Let him rest now," he counselled them jovially.

I closed my eyes to hide the tears that sprang to them. Without opening them I was conscious that the room was left in darkness. Then light footsteps moved about me and, either in sleep or in a swoon, consciousness vanished.



All about me was silence; by the side of my bed a shadow watched. I opened my eyes in the dim obscurity and the shadow came close in tender solicitude. Velvety eyes, compassionate and sorrowful, questioned me: "Are you suffering much, señor?"

They were the eyes of the little girl. The recognition came like waters of consolation to refresh the parched desert of my soul. My thought soared like a lark above the clouds of heavy sleep where a confused and anguished consciousness of reality still persisted. With weary effort I lifted the one arm that remained to me and caressed the childish head which seemed to wear a nimbus of angelic sorrow. She bent over and kissed my hand; when she sat back the velvety eyes were bright with tears.

"Child, don't grieve for me," I said.

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She made an effort to be calm and murmured, deeply moved: "You are very brave."

I smiled, rather proud of that ingenuous admiration: "The arm was of no use."

The child's lips trembled; she gazed at me with big eyes opening upon me like two grey flowers to comfort me with their modest sweetness. Longing to taste again the consolation of her timid voice, I said: "Don't you know that two arms are only an inheritance from our savage ancestors who climbed trees and fought with wild beasts? For life to-day, little girl, one is enough, and more than enough. Besides, I expect that a lopped off branch will only serve to lengthen my life, for now I am like the old trunk of a tree."

"Please don't talk like that," the child sobbed; "it hurts so much!"

Her voice, a little babyish, had the same charm as her eyes. As I lay with head sunk deep in the pillows, the small face showed indistinctly in the dusk of the bedroom, pale with violet circles around the eyes.

"Little girl, talk to me," I murmured weakly.

With a flash of childish gaiety she asked ingenuously, almost laughing: "Why do you want me to talk to you?"

"Because listening to you is good for me. Your voice is a balm."

The child was thoughtfully silent a moment and then repeated, as if she were trying to find a hidden meaning in my words: "My voice is a balm!"

She sat drawn up in her rush chair at my bedside, slowly fingering the beads of her rosary. Sunk in a cave of burning hot pillows that seemed to communicate their fever to me, I

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watched her under drooping eyelids. Little by little the clouds of sleep closed about me once more, a delirious sleep through which dark omens floated like the shadows of a flock of ravens. Suddenly I opened my eyes and the child said: "The Mother Superior was here just now. She scolded me. She says I tire you with my chatter, so you must be very quiet."

She spoke smilingly, and on the sad little face with its dark-circled eyes the smile was like the glint of the sun on a flower wet with dew. Drawn up in her rush chair, she fixed upon me eyes filled with sorrowful dreams. Watching her I felt a soft tenderness well into my heart, as candid as a grandfather's love for the little girl who, in his declining years, shares with him her childish griefs and joys. To hear her voice, I asked: "What is your name?"

"Maximina."

"It is a very pretty name."

She blushed and answered with a frank smile: "It is the only prettiness I have."

"Your eyes are very pretty too."

"My eyes may be. But, all in all, I'm not much."

"Ah! I fancy you are worth a great deal."

She interrupted me, much disturbed: "No, señor, I am not even good."

I held out my one hand to her: "The best little girl I have ever known."

"Little girl . . . ! Little woman, Marquis! How old do you think I am?"

She stood before me with crossed arms, mocking at herself for being so small.

"Possibly twenty," I said with gentle irony.

"You're making fun of me," she exclaimed in delight,

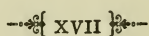
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"I am not fifteen yet. I thought, of course, you were going to say twelve. . . . Oh, dear! Here I am making you talk, and it's the very thing the Mother Superior forbade."

Distressed at her indiscretion, she sat down and touched a finger to her lips; her eyes at the same time begged for pardon. I persisted in making her talk: "Have you been a novice long?"

Smiling, she signalled to me to be silent; then she murmured: "I'm not a novice, I'm being educated here."

She sat thoughtfully abstracted in her rush chair. I lay still under the spell of those eyes peopled by dreams—the eyes of a child, the dreams of a woman!



The loyalist troops marched through the street to the beat of drums. I heard the murmur of the crowd as the populace gathered to greet them. There were cries of "Viva Dios!" and "Viva el Rey!"

Suddenly, I remembered the orders I carried and I tried to sit up, but the pain of my amputated arm was too great, a dull agony that made me think I still had the arm weighing upon me as if it were made of lead. Turning my eyes toward the novice I said, with a jesting sadness: "Sister Maximina, will you ask the Mother Superior to come to my assistance?"

"The Mother Superior is not here, but indeed I can help you!"

Smiling and looking at her steadily, I asked: "Would you dare to risk a great danger for me?"

She dropped her eyes and I saw two roses bloom on her pale cheeks: "Yes, I would."

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"You, my poor little one!"

I was silent, for emotion choked my voice, an emotion of sadness that yet was gratifying. I had a presentiment that those velvety eyes of sorrow would be the last ever to gaze into mine with love. My feeling was that of a dying man who contemplates the flaming gold of an afternoon and knows that, with all its beauty, that afternoon is the last.

The novice raised her eyes to mine and murmured: "You mustn't insist so much that I am little, Marquis."

"To me you seem very big, my child," I answered smiling, "so big that I fancy your eyes look straight into heaven."

There was laughter in her look as, with bewitching gravity, she reproved me like a grandmother: "What things you say, Señor Marquis! What things you say!"

I gazed silently at the childish head, so appealing in its sorrowful charm. Breaking a pause, during which the roses bloomed in her cheeks again, she said with an adorable shyness: "Why did you ask me if I would dare to risk a danger?"

I smiled: "That is not what I asked, my child. I asked if you would dare to risk one for me."

She made no answer and I saw her lips turn white and begin to tremble. She sat tense in her rush chair with hands crossed, not daring to look at me. After a moment she murmured: "Are you not my fellow-creature?"

"Please, child," I sighed, "don't say that!"

And I covered my eyes with my hand. In this tragic pose I remained for a long time, hoping that she would question me, but the child did not speak. At length I decided I must be the first to break that tremendous silence: "Your words hurt me to the heart. They are cruel—cruel as duty is cruel."

"Duty is sweet," the child murmured.

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“Duty that springs from the heart, yes, but not duty that a doctrine dictates.”

The sad velvety eyes looked at me gravely: “I do not understand your words, señor.”

Distressed at seeing my stern frown, she rose after a moment to rearrange my pillow.

“What danger was it, Señor Marquis?” she murmured.

I looked at her, still severe: “A random word, Sister Maximina.”

“But why did you wish to see the Mother Superior?”

“To remind her of an offer she made me that she has forgotten.”

The eyes of the child looked smilingly into mine: “I know—she offered to go and see the priest of Orio. But who told you that she had forgotten? She came to bid you good-bye, but you were asleep and she wouldn’t waken you.”

The novice stopped and ran to the window.

“Viva Dios! Viva el Rey!”

The cries of the people in the street were renewed as they saluted the royalist troops again. The novice sat down on one of the two benches that flanked the only window, a high narrow window with small greenish panes.

“Why do you go so far away?” I asked.

“I can hear you just as well from here.”

And her eyes sent me an appeal of devout sorrow. She remained where she was, gazing out upon the road which wound between bare poplar trees with a background of dark mountains splashed with snow. The voice of the populace rose again from the streets crying, with a religious fervour like that of the Middle Ages: “Viva Dios! Viva el Rey!”

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—{ XVIII }—

Fever excited my thoughts. I slept brief instants to wake with a start, feeling pain in the hand of the amputated arm as if it were being crushed in a vise. The entire day was one of sickening, monotonous agitation. Towards evening Sister Simona came in. She greeted me in her serious, honest voice in which all the old Castilian virtues seemed to mingle: "How are your spirits, Marquis?"

"Very feeble, Sister Simona."

The nun was vigorously shaking the wet drops from her shawl. "My soul, but I had hard work convincing that blessed priest of Orio."

"You saw him?" I murmured weakly.

"I have just come back. A journey of five leagues and a dissertation of one hour—till finally I got tired and spoke forcibly. I was tempted to play the Infanta Carlota and slap his face. But God forgive me, what am I saying! The poor man had never a thought of burning the prisoners; he was detaining them to see if he couldn't convert them. Anyway, they're here now."

I sat up on the pillows: "Sister Simona, please have them brought in."

The Mother Superior went to the door and called: "Sister Jimena, show the gentlemen in here."

Coming back to my bedside, she said: "They are evidently persons of quality. One of them is a perfect giant; the other is very young, with the face of a girl, a scholar in his own country no doubt, for he speaks Latin better than the priest of Orio."

The Mother Superior stopped, listening to the slow footsteps that were coming along the corridor. She waited with

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eyes on the door. Before long a nun appeared, small and wrinkled, with stiffly starched head-dress and a blue apron; her forehead and hands had the whiteness of the sacramental wafer.

"Little Mother, the caballeros arrived so tired out and so numb with the cold that I took them to the kitchen to warm themselves up a bit. You should see them eat the garlic soup I gave them, as if they hadn't tasted solid food for days. Has the Little Mother noticed that people with clean hands are always persons of great quality?"

"I've noticed something of the sort," replied Sister Simona with a condescending smile.

"One is as glum as a mayor at a funeral, but the young one is beautiful enough to be the Archangel San Rafael in a procession, with a silk robe and wings all feathers."

The Mother Superior smiled at the nun whose clear blue eyes had a child-like candour under their wrinkled lids.

"Sister Jimena," she said, with amiable irony, "a draught of wine goes better with garlic soup than feathered wings."

"You're right, Little Mother. I'm going now to give them something that will make their eyes shine."

The bent little figure hurried out on shuffling feet. The Mother Superior watched her go with eyes of indulgent pity.

"Poor Sister Jimena has reached second childhood!"

Then she sat down beside my bed and crossed her hands. In the growing dark, the sad window-panes revealed a vista of dimly outlined mountains spread over with splashes of moon-silvered snow. As the distant call of a bugle sounded, Sister Simona said: "The soldiers who came with you have been committing outrages. The people are very indignant with them and with the boys of a troop that arrived yesterday. Your men gave Acuna, the notary, a hundred lashes for refus-

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ing to open a cask of wine for them; and they wanted to tar and feather Doña Rosa Pedrayes because her husband, who has been dead for twenty years, was a friend of Espartero. I hear they ride their horses upstairs into the drawing-rooms and put the feed for them on the consoles. Outrageous!"

Clear and vibrant came the sound of the bugle flinging its notes on the air like banners of war unfurled. I felt the martial spirit rise in me, feudal, despotic, a noble atavistic spirit that made of me a man of another century. Proud Duke of Alba! Glorious Duke of Sesa, of Terranova y Santangelo! Magnificent Hernán Cortés! Had I lived in your splendid century, I would have been the bearer of your colours. I, too, feel that horror is beautiful; I, too, love the glorious red of blood, the raping of virgins, the sacking of towns; I love the cruel old soldiers, the burning of grain, the violating of sanctuaries.

Raising myself on the pillows I said to the nun: "Señora, my soldiers carry on the tradition of the lancers of Castile; and tradition is beautiful as romance and sacred as prayer. I shall say this to the honourable inhabitants of Villareal de Navarra if they come to me with their complaints."

In the semi-darkness I saw the nun dry a tear and her voice betrayed emotion: "Marquis, I told them that, too. Not in those words, for I have not your eloquence, but in plain Spanish. Soldiers must be soldiers and war must be war!"

Just then the little wrinkled nun timidly opened the door. She held a light in her hand. Smiling under her starched white head-dress, she begged permission for the prisoners to enter.

I recognised the giant at once in spite of the years that had passed. It was the Russian prince who, long ago, in the land of sun across the sea, had provoked my displeasure when

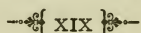
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he tried to seduce Niña Chole. Seeing the two prisoners together, I regretted more than ever that I was debarred from tasting the delights of the one beautiful sin, the pleasure of the gods, the temptation of poets. It would have been an exquisite revenge, my spoil of war; for the giant's companion was the most beautiful of youths. Considering the barrenness of my fate, I sighed in resignation.

The young man spoke to me in Latin, and the divine idiom, on his lips, evoked the golden days when other youths, his brothers, were anointed and rose-crowned by emperors. "My father thanks you, señor."

When he spoke the word father it had the lofty sound of one of his brothers naming an emperor. With a feeling of tenderness, I said: "May the gods deliver you from all evil, my son."

The two prisoners bowed. As I watched them go, the child with the velvety eyes of sorrow came into my thoughts, and I regretted with a sigh that the graceful figure of the youth was not my own.



All night long I heard the distant fire of musketry. At dawn the wounded began to arrive and we learned that the Alfonsine faction was occupying El Santuario de San Cernín. The soldiers came straggling down the mountain roads; they were covered with mud and the dampness steamed from their ponchos. Discouraged, suspicious, they murmured that they had been betrayed.

I had obtained permission to get up. With forehead pressed against the window-pane I looked out upon the mountains, which were enveloped in grey veils of rain. I felt very weak and the first realisation of myself up and dressed, with one

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arm gone, filled me with an overpowering grief. My pride was quickened as I miserably foresaw the delight of my enemies. (I do not name them in these memoirs, for I would not so immortalise them.) In gloomy discouragement I passed the whole day sitting on one of the window-seats. The child with the velvety eyes of sorrow stayed with me much of the time.

I said to her once: "Sister Maximina, which balm are you bringing me?"

She smiled and came shyly to sit down on the other window-seat. I took her hand. "Sister Maximina, you are the owner of three balms. One is the balm of your words; one is the balm of your smiles; and the last is the balm of your velvety eyes."

"I don't think that what you say is true," she answered, "but I like very much to hear you say it. You can say things as nobody else in the world can."

She stopped and a rosy blush spread over her cheeks. Then she rubbed the clouded window-panes and gazed abstractedly into the melancholy garden. The dark green myrtle of the churchyard crept humbly beneath the trees and the rain dropped forlornly from bare black branches. Little birds, snow-birds, hopped on the well-curb; at the foot of the wall a ewe lamb bleated as it pulled at its tether. Against a background of clouded sky a flock of ravens passed.

"Sister Maximina!" I repeated softly.

She turned languidly like a sick child whom games can no longer divert: "Yes, Señor Marquis?"

In her velvety eyes all the sadness of the landscape seemed to have come to rest.

"Sister Maximina, the wounds in my soul are opening wide; I need one of your three balms. Which will you give me?"

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"Whichever you want."

"I want the balm of your eyes." And I kissed them paternally.

She winked her eyelids many times and sat soberly contemplating her hands, slender and frail as the hands of a child princess. A deep tenderness filled my being with an unknown voluptuousness. It was as if a perfume of tears were diffused in the course of happy hours.

"Sister Maximina. . . ."

"Yes, Señor Marquis?"

"You are ungenerous with your treasures. Why won't you look at me? Why won't you speak to me? Why won't you smile at me, Sister Maximina?"

With a look as languid and sorrowful as a sigh she answered: "I was thinking you have been up a very long time. Will it not do you harm?"

Taking her two hands I drew her toward me: "It will not do me harm if you will be generous with your balms."

And for the first time I kissed her upon the lips. They were icy. I forgot the sentimental tone and with all the fire of my young years I asked: "Could you possibly love me?"

She did not answer, but a quiver went through her frame, I repeated again: "Could you, with your child's soul, possibly love me?"

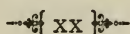
"Yes. I love you! I love you!"

Her look changed; she wrenched herself from my embrace and fled. I did not see her again all that day. I remained seated on the window bench for a long time. Over the mountains the moon rose into a fantastically clouded sky; the garden was dark; the house was hushed in saintly peace. I felt the tears rush to my eyes. Love was the emotion from which they sprang, for love brings a profound sadness to lives

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that are on the wane. As the greatest of all imagined joys I dreamed that the child with the velvety eyes of compassion might wipe those tears away.

The nuns were droning, in chorus, a rosary of prayer; its murmur reached me like an echo from those sweet modest spirits who care for the suffering as for the roses in their garden and who love Jesus Christ Our Saviour. The solitary moon moved across the dark of the sky, distant, white, like a novice escaped from her cell. It was Sister Maximina.



After a night spent in struggle against sin and insomnia, nothing purifies the heart like hearing mass at dawn and bathing one's soul in prayer. Prayer at that early hour is a dew that quenches the fires of the Inferno. I who have been a great sinner learned this very early in life, and have never forgotten it. When the bell for the nuns began to ring I rose. Upon my knees in the chancel, shivering under my soldier's cloak, I listened to the mass which was celebrated by the chaplain. Gaunt-looking youths with bandaged heads and blankets wrapped around them knelt on the benches, their profiles outlined against the shadows along the walls. Hollow coughs reverberated down the dimly lighted aisles, deadening the murmur of the Latin liturgy. The mass ended, I went out into the patio. The stones of its pavement were shining wet with rain. Convalescent soldiers, pale and hollow-eyed from fever, were walking idly about. In the light of dawn they looked like spectres. Almost all of them were peasant lads, sick with weariness and nostalgia. Only one of them had been wounded in battle. I went over to talk to him. At my approach he drew himself up with military precision.

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"How are things with you, my lad?" I asked.

"I'm here, waiting to be thrown into the streets!"

"Where were you wounded?"

"In the head."

"In what action, I mean."

"A skirmish near Otáiz."

"What body of troops?"

"Our boys alone against two companies of Ciudad Rodrigo."

"And what was your detachment?"

"The monk's men. It was the first time I had been under fire."

"What monk?"

"The one from Estella."

"Fray Ambrosio?"

"I think so."

"But don't you know him?"

"No, señor. Miquelcho was in command. We were told that the monk had been wounded."

"Then you were not one of his company?"

"No, señor. They picked me up, with three others, when they passed through Omellín."

"And they forced you to follow them?"

"Yes, señor. They made a levy."

"How did the monk's men fight?"

"Very well, it seemed to me. We dropped seven of the boys with the red breeches. We lay waiting for them hidden in a ditch by the road. They came along carelessly, they were singing. . . ."

The young man stopped short. A distant clamour of women's tongues came from the house, frightened voices

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wailing: "How dreadful!" "Holy Virgin!" "Blessed Jesus!"

Then quickly the clamour died away and the house regained its saintly peace. The soldiers commented on the incident and there were various versions. Heedless of the gossip, I strolled up and down beneath the arches. Scattered phrases hinting at tragedy came to me. In one group they talked of a nun, old and bedridden, who had set fire to the curtains of her bed; in another they told of a novice found lying dead in her cell close to the brazier. I felt tired from my walk beneath the arches where the rain came driving in, and I started for my room. In one of the corridors I met Sister Jimena.

"Sister," I said, "may I ask the cause of all this weeping?"

The nun hesitated an instant and then replied, smiling candidly: "Weeping? I heard nothing of it. I have been busy giving my soldier boys their rations. Virgin of Carmel, it makes my heart ache the way the poor things look!"

Not caring to insist, I left her and retired to my cell. The pale sun of a winter morning trembled on the panes of the narrow window which looked on the winding road, the bare poplars and the background of sombre mountains blotted with snow. Soldiers continued to arrive at intervals. The nuns, congregated in the garden, received them with tender solicitude and administered treatment after first washing their wounds with miraculous waters. I could hear a heavy murmur of men's voices full of anger and suffering. They were all complaining that they had been betrayed. I foresaw then the end of the war. Gazing at those grim mountain peaks from which eagles came down and treachery descended, I remembered the Queen's words: "It must not be said of the Spanish caballeros that they brought a princess from a foreign land to dress her in widow's weeds."

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—❧ XXI ❧—

There was a rapping of knuckles on the door. I turned my head and discovered Sister Simona in the doorway. Fixing eyes of authority upon me, she said in a voice so changed that I did not recognise it: "Señor Marquis, I bring gratifying news."

She paused, as if to heighten the significance of her words; then, not advancing a step, she stood stiffly in the doorway and continued: "The doctor has given you your discharge. You may proceed upon your way with no danger whatsoever."

Surprised, I stared at the nun, trying to read her thoughts, but the face in the shadow of the head-dress was impenetrable. I answered deliberately in a tone which surpassed in loftiness that in which the nun had addressed me: "When may I go?"

"Whenever you wish."

Sister Simona started to leave, but with a gesture I detained her: "Hear me, señora."

"What is it?"

"I would like to bid good-bye to the little girl who has tended me through these sad days."

"The child is ill."

"And may I not see her?"

"No. The cells are a cloister."

She had crossed the threshold but now turned resolutely, re-entered the room and shut the door. Her voice vibrated with angry distress as she said: "The worst of all your infamies was committed when you made this child love you."

I confess that this impeachment awakened in me no more than a tenderly sentimental regret: "Sister Simona, do you

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imagine that, with my white hair and lacking an arm, I could still make any one love me!"

The nun fixed me with eyes that showed an angry glow under the wrinkled lids.

"A child who is an angel, yes. Realising that you could no longer make conquests by your fine looks, you adopted an attitude of manful sadness that made her little heart pity you. Poor child, she has confessed it all to me."

I bowed my head and repeated: "My poor child."

With a cry, Sister Simona shrank back from me: "You knew!"

I was stunned, appalled. Heavy black clouds closed about my soul, and a voice without accent, without echo, the unwelcome voice of foreboding, spoke within. I thought with terror of my sins as if death were close to me. My past years seemed dark with shadow like cisterns of lifeless waters. The voice of presentiment repeated implacably the words which once before I had remembered with such obstinate insistence.

The nun, wringing her hands in horror, kept repeating: "You knew! You knew!"

And her voice, hushed with abhorrence of my sin, sent a shiver through me. It was as if I were dead and her words were reaching me in the tomb like an accusation from the world.

The mystery of those sweet sorrowful eyes was the mystery of my youthful melancholies when I was a lover and a poet. Dear eyes! I had loved them because I had found in them the romantic sighs of my youth, the sentimental longings which, disappointing in the attainment, had made me sceptical

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of life. In those eyes, too, was the shadow of that perversity which, Don Juan-like, exults in making victims and then weeps with them.

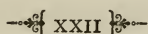
The words which the nun kept repeating over and over fell upon me like drops of burning metal: "You knew!"

I remained darkly silent. I made mental examination of my conscience, hoping to chasten my soul with the scourge of remorse, but the consolation of the sinner who repents was denied me. I could only feel that my sin did not compare with the sin of our common origin. I even lamented, with Jacopo Casanova, that fathers in all ages were not permitted to make the happiness of their children. The nun, with hands clasped, kept repeating in accents of horror and unbelief: "You knew! You knew!"

Suddenly fixing me with the burning eyes of a fanatic, she crossed herself and burst into maledictions. As if she were the devil I rushed from the room. I went down into the patio. Several soldiers of my escort were talking with the wounded and I gave the order to sound boots and saddles. Shortly afterward the bugle sounded its lively call, domineering as a cock-crow. The ten lancers of my escort assembled in the plaza. Before the great emblazoned door the horses pawed the ground, impatient under the check of their riders. When I came to mount I felt the lack of my arm so keenly that profound discouragement seized me. I wanted the balm of those velvety eyes and I looked up at the high narrow windows with the morning sun trembling over them. Every one was closed. I took up the reins, and engulfed in an ocean of bitter remembrance I rode at the head of my lancers. At the top of the hill, I turned to send a last sigh toward the old house where I had encountered the sweetest love of my life. Through the panes of one window I saw the trembling

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reflection of many lights. Like the dark flight of a bat came a realisation of the calamity which the nuns had tried to hide. I dropped the reins on the saddle-bow and covered my eyes with my hand, that my lancers should not see me weep. In this black mood of grief and discouragement, back to my memory with feverish insistence came those trivial words: "A plain little creature! A plain little creature!"



That journey was the saddest of my life. Grief and bitter memories gave me not an instant's peace. I burned with fever and again a chill would shake me till my teeth chattered. At times delirium seized me. Wild, fantastic thoughts jumbled in my brain like a nightmare, filling me with a frenzy of anguish. When we entered the streets of Estella towards evening I could barely sit my horse and upon dismounting I almost sank to the ground.

I took lodging in the home of two ladies, a mother and daughter. The elder was the widow of the famous Don Miguel de Arizcun. I still retain a vivid recollection of the two women—their woollen dresses, faded faces and thin hands, the noiselessness of their walk and their subdued voices. They tended me with loving care, brought me broth and excellent wine and at every moment opened my door to see if I slept or wanted for anything.

As night fell, a loud knocking upon the door reverberated through the house and the maiden daughter came to my room with rather a frightened air: "Some one wishes to see you, Señor Marquis."

The cloaked figure of a tall man with a bandage across his forehead stood in the doorway. His greeting was as

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solemn as a prayer for the dead: "I salute the illustrious nobleman and I deplore his misfortune."

It was Fray Ambrosio, and I was rejoiced to see him. His spurs clanked over the floor as he came towards me, his right hand holding his temple to check the trembling of his head. As the lady bowed and withdrew, she said in mellifluous tones: "You mustn't talk very loud and be careful not to tire the patient."

The monk assented with a look. We were left alone. He took a seat at my bedside and began to mumble timeworn reflections: "God be praised! After travelling the world over, and encountering every sort of danger, to lose an arm in this war—which is not a war. Ah, well! We do not know where we shall meet misfortune, nor where good fortune or even death lies awaiting us. We know nothing. Lucky the man whose last hour does not surprise him in mortal sin."

This homily of the warrior-monk diverted me from my sufferings. I knew it was intended for my spiritual edification and I could hardly help laughing. The fever had left me so pale and emaciated that Fray Ambrosio judged me to be at the point of death, and he was pleased to put aside for the moment his soldier's bluster to start on his journey to the other world a friend who was dying for the Cause. He was a monk who could fight with equal vigour the Alfonsine hosts or the hosts of Satan. He had loosened the bandage which he wore like a turban over his white brows and now disclosed the bloody lips of a cut that split his forehead. I gave a groan from my sepulchre among the pillows.

"Fray Ambrosio," I said weakly, in a tone of light jest, "you have not yet related your heroic achievements nor how you received that wound."

The monk rose to his feet, looking as fierce as an ogre.

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To me he was quite as diverting as the ogres in fairy-tales.

"How did I receive this wound? Without glory, as you did yours. Heroic deeds? There are no more heroic deeds, no wars, nothing but farces. The Alfonsist generals run from us and we run from the Alfonsist generals. It's a war for winning rank and for gaining shame. Bear in mind what I say: this war will end as a sell like the other. There are a great many generals in the Alfonsist camp capable of that kind of mediation. That's the way to earn the three gold cords nowadays."

He paused in extreme ill-humour and fumblingly tried to replace the bandage with hands that shook almost as violently as his head. His skull, bare and horrible, made one think of the heads of those gigantic Moors who raise themselves dripping with blood from under the horse of the Apostle.

"Fray Ambrosio," I said with a smile, "I am almost ready to say that I am glad the Cause will not be victorious."

He looked at me in astonishment: "Do you speak without irony?"

"Without irony."

And it was true. Majesty fallen has always seemed more beautiful to me than majesty seated upon the throne; I was a defender of the Cause for æsthetic reasons. The Carlist tradition has for me the solemn charm of a great cathedral. Even while the war was in progress it would have contented me to have it declared a national monument. And without vainglory I may say that the King felt as I did.

The friar spread his arms and unchained the thunder of his voice: "The Cause will not be victorious because of traitors!"

For a moment he stood in frowning silence with the bandage between his hands and the fearful gash that split his

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forehead exposed. I repeated my former question: "Are we not to learn how you received that wound, Fray Ambrosio?"

He answered mumbling: "I don't know. . . . I don't remember," still trying to replace the bandage on his head.

I looked at him in perplexity. He was standing by my bed, and in the semi-obscurity the bare tremulous skull showed white against the shadow-covered wall. Suddenly he tore the bandage into shreds and threw it on the floor. "Señor Marquis," he exclaimed, "let us understand each other. You know very well how I received this wound and you are asking to mortify me."

I sat up on the pillows at this. "Fray Ambrosio," I said, with lofty contempt, "I have suffered too much these days to give my attention to your affairs."

He frowned and bent his head. "True! You also have had your wound. Well, this was given me by that thief of a Miquelcho. A traitor who robbed me of my command! My debt to you I shall pay when I can. Believe me, the occurrence of that night weighs upon me. But there's nothing to be done now. Fortunately, the Señor Marquis understands all things."

"And excuses all things, Fray Ambrosio," I interrupted.

His anger subsided into depression and with a sigh he dropped into a chair by my bedside. After a time, during which he searched beneath his cloak, he began: "I have always said it! The greatest caballero of Spain! I have four gold *onzas* here for you."

He had drawn the money from the lining of his cloak wrapped up in a paper discoloured with snuff, and he held it out with that jovial laugh which brought a vision of a vast monastic refectory.

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"Fray Ambrosio," I said, magnanimously, "I would have you apply those four *onzas* to saying a mass."

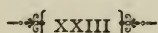
"For what?"

"For the triumph of the Cause."

He had risen from the chair with the intention of ending his visit. From my pillow I watched him in mocking silence, for I saw that he was irresolute. At length he said: "I have a request to transmit from that lady. She still cares for you but she begs that you will not try to see her again."

I sat up in angry surprise. Remembering the other trick the friar had played, I judged that his words held some new deceit. I told him so and contemptuously pointed to the door. He attempted to make answer, but without a word I repeated the same imperious gesture and he flung himself rudely from the room muttering threats.

The sound spread through the house and brought the two ladies, in naïve alarm, to my door.



All night I slept, a strength-restoring, happy sleep. The bells of a neighbouring church wakened me at dawn and, shortly afterward, the two ladies who tended me appeared at my door. Their heads were adorned with mantillas fastened to the elaborate coiffures with huge jet pins and both had rosaries twisted around their wrists. Voice, manner, costume, all were exactly alike in both. They greeted me with that worn suavity peculiar to pious ladies. Both smiled foolishly, sweet smiles that seemed to wreath into the mysterious shadows of their mantillas.

"Are you going to mass?" I inquired.

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"No, we have just come from there."

"What is the news in Estella?"

"What news would you have!"

The two voices sounded in concord as if repeating a litany, and in the dim light of the bedroom they seemed more nun-like than ever.

I determined to ask my question frankly: "Do you know how the Conde de Volfani is?"

They exchanged glances and I believe a blush tinged their faded cheeks. There was blank silence for a moment and then, at a look from her mother, the daughter over whose innocence she had watched for almost forty years left my bedroom. At the door she turned upon me the chastely distant smile of the untouched virgin: "I am glad you are feeling better, Señor Marquis."

And with a shyly elegant walk she vanished into the darkness of the corridor. I assumed an air of indifference as I continued the conversation with the other lady.

"Volfani is like a brother to me. The day we left he suffered a stroke and I have heard nothing more."

"Yes," the lady sighed, "he has never recovered consciousness. The one I feel extremely sorry for is the Condesa. When they first brought him home she spent five days and nights at his bedside. And they say that she still waits upon him and nurses him with the greatest devotion."

I confess that this—one might almost say posthumous—love which Maria Antonietta evinced for her husband filled me with astonishment and dejection. How often in those bitter days as I contemplated the loss of my arm I had given myself over to dreams. I had imagined the blood of my wound and the tears from her eyes falling together upon our sinful love to purify it! I had felt a divine consolation in the belief that

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her fleshly love would be transmuted to a mysteriously exalted spiritual love.

With a jealously beating heart, I murmured: "And there is no improvement in the Conde's condition?"

"Improvement, yes, but he is still like a child. They dress him, they put him in his chair, and there he spends the day. They say he doesn't recognise any one."

As she spoke the good lady took off her mantilla, folded it carefully and struck the pins through it. Noticing my silence she judged it tactful to leave me.

"Good-bye for the present, Señor Marquis. If you wish for anything you have only to call."

She started to go but paused at the door, her attention fixed on a sound of approaching footsteps. She peered out, and when she saw who was arriving, she said: "I am leaving you in good company. Here is Fray Ambrosio."

I sat up in surprise. The monk came into the room muttering.

"I ought never to set foot in this house again after the way the illustrious nobleman insulted me. But where a friend is concerned poor Fray Ambrosio pardons anything."

I held out my hand.

"We will say no more. I have just heard of the spiritual conversion of our saintly Condesa."

"And what do you think now? Do you realise that this poor friar did not deserve your high and mighty arrogance of yesterday? I was a messenger, a most humble messenger."

Fray Ambrosio squeezed my hand till the bones crunched.

"We will say no more," I repeated.

"But we must say more. Do you still doubt that I am your friend?"

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The moment was solemn; I took advantage of it to free my hand. Lifting it to my heart, I answered: "Never!"

The monk straightened himself: "I have seen the Condesa."

"And what has our saint to say?"

"She would like to see you just once to say good-bye."

Instead of joy, a shadow of sadness darkened my soul on learning this decision of Maria Antonieta. Was it perhaps the sorrow of presenting myself before those beautiful eyes, my glamour gone, with a stump for an arm?



Leaning on the friar's arm, I left my hospitable lodgings to set out for the residence of the King. A pale sun shining through rents in the leaden clouds was melting the white wake of snow that had lain for days close under the dark walls. I walked along in silence. I was recalling with romantic sadness the history of my love affair and enjoying the mortuary perfume of the good-bye that Maria Antonieta was about to give me. The monk had told me that, because of scruples which would do credit to a saint, she did not wish to see me in her own house but would expect to meet me at the residence of the King. Not to be outdone in scruples, I declared with a sigh that if I was hurrying to the designated spot it was not for the purpose of seeing her but to present my respects to the Queen.

On entering the salon I feared the tears would rush to my eyes. I remembered that day when I had kissed the Queen's white hand and felt a knightly longing to consecrate my life to the Señora. Now, for the first time, I experienced a proud, noble consolation in my disfigurement; the consolation of having shed my blood for that pale saintly princess who sat

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surrounded by her ladies embroidering scapulars for the soldiers of the Cause. Upon my entrance several ladies rose to their feet as for a dignitary of the Church. The Queen looked at me: "I have heard of your misfortune and you do not know how I have prayed for you. God willed that your life should be spared."

I bowed low. "God did not concede me the privilege of giving my life for you."

Much affected by my words, the ladies wiped their eyes. I achieved a sad smile, considering this to be the attitude I must henceforth adopt to make my disfigurement seem poetic. The Queen, with a perfect nobility, said: "Men of your quality have no need of arms; the heart is sufficient."

"I thank you, Señora."

There was a brief silence. Then a bishop who was present murmured in a low tone: "God has suffered you to keep the right hand, the hand of the pen and of the sword."

The words of the prelate excited a murmur of admiration among the ladies. I turned and my eyes encountered the eyes of Maria Antonieta. They sparkled under a veil of tears. I greeted her with a light smile but she remained grave, gazing at me fixedly. The prelate approached me, benevolently pastoral: "Our dear Marquis must have suffered a great deal?"

My response was a look and his lordship turned down his eyelids in solemn sorrow: "God's will be done!"

The ladies sighed. Doña Margarita alone remained serene and silent. The heart of a princess told her that for one of my pride pity was humiliation. The prelate continued: "Now that you must take a forced rest you should write a book of your life."

And the Queen said smiling: "Your memoirs would be very interesting, Bradomín."

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At this the Marquesa de Tor grumbled: "The most interesting things he wouldn't tell."

"I would tell only of my sins," I answered with a bow.

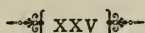
My lady aunt, the Marquesa de Tor, continued to growl, but I could not catch what she said and the prelate proceeded as if he were delivering a sermon: "Extraordinary things are told of our illustrious Marquis. Confessions, when they are sincere, always contain a great lesson; we may call to mind those of Saint Augustine. Very often, of course, pride blinds us and in these books we make a parade of our sins and vices; one recalls the work of the impious philosopher Ginebra. In such cases the clarity of the lesson usually enjoyed from confessions, the limpid spring of its instructiveness, becomes turbid."

The attention of the ladies strayed from the sermon; they talked together in undertones; Maria Antonieta sat silently apart, apparently absorbed in her work. The discourse of the prelate seemed to edify no one but myself, and not being an egotist I was prepared to sacrifice myself for the ladies. With great humility I interrupted: "I do not aspire to teach, but to amuse. The whole of my doctrine lies in a single phrase: *Vive la bagatelle!* To have learned to smile is, in my opinion, the greatest victory of the human race."

At this there was a murmur of merriment which made one almost doubt that men could have been so serious for centuries: how could one account for those epochs in which history does not record a single smile? His lordship lifted his arms to heaven: "It is indeed probable, nay almost certain, that the men of history did not say, with our frenchified Marquis: *Vive la bagatelle.* Señor Marquis de Bradomín, beware lest you lose your soul for a *bagatelle.* In hell no doubt they have been smiling always."

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I had a reply on my lips, but the Queen's eyes were severe. The prelate gathered his robes together with a doctoral air, and adopting the smilingly aggressive tone in which theologians are wont to wage their controversies he began a long sermon.



The Marquesa de Tor called me over to a window-corner. I went reluctantly, for I recognised the forbidding expression familiar in all of my pious aunts when they lectured me, and I anticipated nothing flattering. Her first words confirmed my fears: "I did not expect to see you here. . . . You will leave at once. . . ."

"I earnestly wish to obey you, but," I murmured sentimentally, "my heart forbids it."

"It is not I who asks but that poor soul."

And with a look she indicated Maria Antonieta. I sighed, covering my eyes with my hand: "And can that poor soul refuse to bid me good-bye when it is to be forever?"

My noble aunt hesitated. Underneath the wrinkles and the stern expression she preserved the innocent sentimentality of all old ladies who were beauties in the early decades of the century.

"Xavier, don't try to separate her from her husband. You, Xavier, better than any one, should understand the sacrifice she is making. She wants to be faithful to this spectre whom only a miracle has saved from death."

The old lady said this dramatically, with my hand clasped between her mummy-like claws. Fearing that emotion might choke my voice, I answered in a very low tone: "What wrong can there be in our saying good-bye? In fact, it was she who wished it."

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"Because you begged her and the poor thing hadn't the courage to deny you. Maria Antonieta would live forever in your heart. She is prepared to renounce you yourself, but not your love. Since my years have brought me an understanding of the world, I know that what she hopes for is ridiculous. Xavier, if you are not capable of respecting her sacrifice, try at least not to make it more cruel."

The Marquesa de Tor dried a tear. I spoke with sorrowful resentment: "You fear that I am incapable of respecting her sacrifice. You are unjust to me, but in that you only follow the family tradition. It distresses me, this idea that every one has of me! God who can read all hearts . . ."

My lady aunt here recovered her authoritative tone: "Stop! You are the archetype of Don Juans, ugly, sentimental, Catholic!"

She was so old, poor lady, that she had forgotten the inconstancy of the feminine heart. She did not realise that when one lacks an arm and one's hair is streaked with white one must perforce renounce Don Juanism. Alas! I knew that the velvety eyes of sorrow, which had opened for me like two grey flowers opening to the light of dawn, would be the last ever to look at me with love. For me, the only attitude with women now was the cold indifference of the fallen idol. For the first time at that moment I had a foreboding of this, and with a sad smile I showed the ancient lady my empty sleeve. The remembrance of the child cloistered in that old village mansion brought such a flood of tenderness that I was suddenly moved to prevaricate a little in speaking of Maria Antonieta: "Maria Antonieta is the only woman in the world who still cares for me. Her love is all that remains to me. I was resigned to not seeing her; my disillusion was complete;

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I was thinking of entering a monastery when I heard that she wanted to bid me good-bye for the last time."

"And suppose I beg you now to go away?"

"You?"

"In Maria Antonieta's name."

"I should be told by Maria Antonieta herself, I think."

"And she, poor woman, should she not be spared this new pain?"

"If I heeded her plea to-day, perhaps to-morrow she would call me back again. Do you suppose this Christian devotion that draws her to her husband now is going to last forever?"

Before the old lady could answer, a voice from behind me, hoarse and choked with tears, moaned: "Forever, Xavier!"

I turned and confronted Maria Antonieta. Immobile, with arms crossed, she stood steadfastly regarding me. I motioned to my empty sleeve and with a look of horror she closed her eyes. In appearance she was much changed; she seemed many years older. Maria Antonieta was extremely tall, with a lofty majesty of form; her hair, always very dark, now showed streaks of white; and her cheeks had the droop of fading flowers, the proud bloodless cheeks of penitence that would no longer suffer kisses or caresses. She had the mouth of a statue and black eyes where fire slept; her voice was grave, of a warm timbre. There was something strange about her. One felt she might be listening to the flutter of departing spirits, might, in the stretches of the night, communicate with them.

After a long, painful silence, she repeated again: "Forever, Xavier."

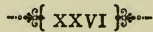
I gazed at her intently. "Will it last longer than my love?"

"As long as your love."

The Marquis de Bradomin

The Marquesa de Tor, who was directing her short-sighted gaze all over the room, warned us in an undertone: "If you must talk to one another, at least let it not be here."

Maria Antonieta, assenting with her eyes, moved gravely away as some of the ladies began to regard us curiously. Just then, the King's two dogs made an impetuous entrance into the room and Don Carlos came in shortly afterward. When he saw me he came forward and, without uttering a word, held me in a long embrace. Then he began to talk in a jesting tone as if nothing had happened to me. I believe that no expression of his appreciation could have touched me as did the sensitive understanding of that kingly heart.



My lady aunt, the Marquesa de Tor, made a sign for me to follow her and conducted me to her apartment where I found Maria Antonieta, alone and in tears. When I entered she rose to her feet and stared at me with reddened eyes. Her breath came in gasps and her voice was strained and hoarse.

"Xavier, we must say good-bye. I can't tell you what I have suffered since the night we separated."

With the ghost of a smile I interrupted: "You remember it was with the promise to love each other forever?"

She, in turn, interrupted me: "You ask me to abandon a poor creature who is helpless—and that, never, never, never! To do that would be an infamy."

"It is infamies that love imposes; but alas, I am too old now to expect any woman to commit one for me."

"Xavier, I must sacrifice myself."

"There are sacrifices which come too late, Maria Antonieta."

Sonata of Winter

"You are cruel!"

"Cruel?"

"You mean that my sacrifice should have been to remain faithful to him?"

"Possibly that would have been better, but in accusing you I accuse myself also. Neither of us had learned to make sacrifices; that science is only acquired with years, after the heart is frozen."

"Xavier, this is the last time we shall see each other, and what a bitter memory your words will leave with me."

"You believe this is the last time? I do not. If I yielded to your entreaty, my dear Maria Antonieta, you would call me back again."

"Why do you say that? And even if I were cowardly enough to call you back, you would not come. This love of ours is impossible now."

"I would always come."

Maria Antonieta lifted to heaven eyes the beauty of which was enhanced by tears, and she murmured as if it were a prayer: "Oh, God, perhaps a day will come when my will grows weak and my cross wearies me!"

I went so close that I drank her breath.

"That day has come," I whispered, and seized her hands.

"Never! Never!"

She tried to free her hands, but I still held them as I murmured close to her ear: "Why are you trembling? What do you fear? That day has come."

"Go, Xavier. Leave me."

"My dear Maria Antonieta, how you make me suffer with your scruples!"

"Go. Go. Don't speak to me. I don't want to hear you."

The Marquis de Bradomin

I covered her hands with kisses. "Divine scruples of a saint."

With terror in her eyes she moved away from me. There was a long silence. Maria Antonieta passed her hands across her forehead and drew long, gasping breaths. Little by little she grew calmer. With desperate resolution in her eyes she said: "Xavier, I am going to tell you something that will cause you great pain. My dream was to have you love me as you would the innocence of sixteen. Poor fool! And I concealed my real life from you. When you questioned me I denied everything, and now, now. . . . You understand, but you do not say that you pardon me, Xavier."

"I understand. There have been others you cared for?"

"Yes."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"So that you will despise me. You smile?"

"My dear Maria Antonieta," I answered deliberately, "I smile because I see no reason for such severity."

She smothered a sob.

"Who were your lovers?" I asked.

"He is dead."

"No more than one?"

"No."

"Two counting myself then. This lover, my successor, no doubt. . . ."

"No."

"I am consoled. There are some who prefer to be the first love. I have ever preferred to be the last. Perhaps I shall be."

"The last and only one, Xavier."

"Why deny the past? Do you imagine that can console me? It would have been more merciful to keep silent."

Sonata of Winter

Maria Antonieta raised her eyes once more to question heaven. "What have I done, Lord Jesus? Xavier, forget all that I have said and forgive me. . . . But no, you must not forget nor forgive."

"Shall I be less magnanimous than your husband?"

"How cruel you are!"

"It is life that is cruel, unless we go through it blindly like children."

"What scorn you have of me! That is my penance."

"Scorn, no. You are like all women, neither better nor worse. Adios, Maria Antonieta."

Maria Antonieta burst into sobs and threw herself on the sofa, tearing at her handkerchief with her teeth. I stood in front of her. There was a silence broken only by sighs. Then Maria Antonieta dried her tears and looked up at me with a sad smile. "Xavier, if all women are as you judge me to be, perhaps I have not been like them. Pity me and do not cherish bitterness toward me."

"It is not bitterness I feel but the sadness of disillusion, a sadness as if the snow of winter were falling upon me, covering, with a cold shroud, the waste land of my soul."

"Other women will love you."

"I fear they will see too clearly my white head and my empty sleeve."

"What difference does an arm make! What difference do white hairs make! For me, they would only make me love you more. Xavier, good-bye for life!"

"Who can say what life may hold! Good-bye, Maria Antonieta."

These words were the last. She held her hand out to me in silence. I kissed it and we parted. As I passed through the door I felt the temptation to turn my head but I conquered

The Marquis de Bradomin

it. If war gave me no chance to show myself heroic, love did on that winter day when it took leave of me, perhaps forever.



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